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# DOOM ETERNAL

**THE DECADE'S BEST  
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**HARDWARE**

**GRAPHICS  
CARDS**

**NVIDIA RTX  
VS RADEON**

FUTURE  
ISSUE 334

**PHIL SPENCER**

THE XBOX BOSS ON  
GAME PASS, STEAM  
AND THE RETURN OF  
FLIGHT SIMULATOR



**THE SIMS**

FROM FAMILY TO FAN  
FICTION, WHAT EA'S  
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ITS PLAYERS





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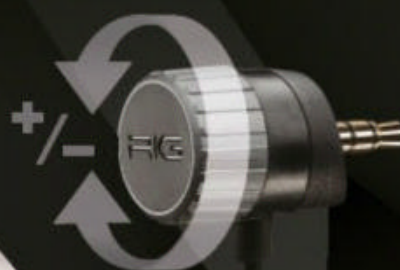






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# “DOOM PROVED TO BE A CONFIDENT, CLEVER STATEMENT”



In an era where singleplayer shooters have fallen out of fashion, id Software's return to *Doom* proved to be a confident, clever statement about what an FPS can be. The 2016 release was arguably the best shooter of the decade, using forward momentum to replicate the frenetic pace of the '90s classics. By all accounts *Doom Eternal* looks to focus in on

everything that made its predecessor great. Head to p42 to read Andy's bloody report.

In a classic case of counter-programming, this issue we also celebrate *The Sims*, a series that's excelled at letting every kind of player tell the stories that interest them. Enjoy the issue!

### PHIL SAVAGE

**Specialist in**  
Coverlines

**Twitter**  
[@Octaeder](https://twitter.com/Octaeder)

### This month

Made the terrible decision to put the words "Granny Theft Auto" on the cover of a magazine.

*Phil Savage*

**PHIL SAVAGE**  
**EDITOR**

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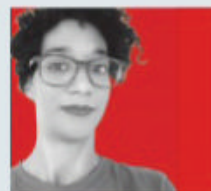


**ANDY KELLY**  
**Specialist in**  
Demon guts

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### This month

Had a very good time doing unspeakable things to demons and then speaking about them.



**MALINDY HETFELD**  
**Specialist in**  
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### This month

Enjoyed the best half of the deputy editor role – the half without the magazine deadline in it.



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### This month

Suffered the worst half of the deputy editor role – the half with the magazine deadline in it.



**SAMUEL ROBERTS**  
**Specialist in**  
Old anime

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### This month

Exorcised his E3 demons by writing a whole lot of previews and watching Neon Genesis Evangelion.



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SEPTEMBER 2019

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## MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT

Previously in *EVE*, the Drifter faction assassinated Amarr empress Jamyll I.

## ALIENS VS EVE ONLINE

A race of creepy aliens is invading **NEW EDEN**, but veteran players aren't happy

**A**ttacking out of nowhere, a non-player faction called the Drifters has invaded New Eden, the galaxy where *EVE Online* takes place. The Borg-like aliens laid siege to starbases and destroyed more than 5,000 player ships, amounting to hundreds of billions of ISK, *EVE*'s in-game currency. The major player-led alliances scrambled to respond, but not before a huge amount of damage was done – and now they're pissed.

What was intended as an attempt to inject some life into *EVE*'s universe

served mainly as an annoyance for the large groups of players who call New Eden home. "The lack of forewarning that normally precludes an event like this took a lot of the playerbase by surprise," TEST Alliance fleet commander Seraph Padecain told our own Steven

**IT WAS AN ATTEMPT  
TO SHAKE NEW  
EDEN UP IN AN  
EXCITING WAY**

Messner. For them, repelling the alien invasion has been a boring grind and a frustrating nuisance.

It was an attempt to shake New Eden up in an exciting way, but CCP has inadvertently started a war with its own players. In response to the event, a source told us that an "unprecedented" meeting of nearly every major alliance is now in the works to fire back at CCP.

#### FIGHTING BACK

At one point The Imperium fought back 170 individual Drifter attacks in a six-hour period. And since the invasion started, TEST has been hit anywhere from 20 to 40 times a day



PYRAMID POWER

## BUILDERS OF EGYPT



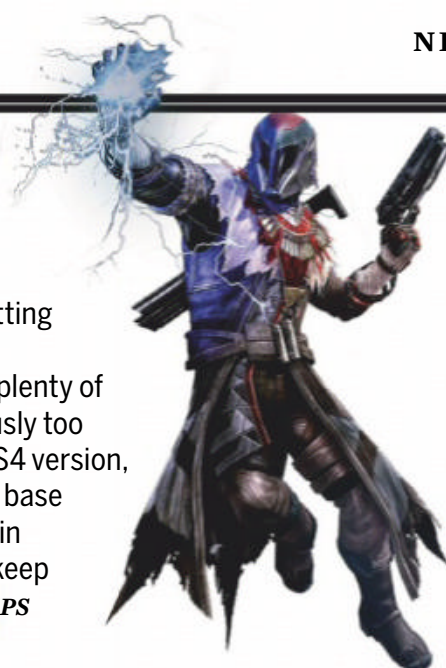
*Builders of Egypt* is a new city-builder. I've always been fascinated by Ancient Egypt, so I'm really into the idea of building my own pyramids and running a mighty desert empire. The game is almost ready, but the developer is listening to fan feedback to tweak any issues before launch. ■ **AK**

SHINING LIGHT

## DESTINY 2



*Destiny 2* is getting cross-save. As someone with plenty of friends previously too invested to abandon the PS4 version, this is a godsend. Plus, the base game is going free-to-play in September, which should keep the servers nice and full. ■ **PS**



FINANCIAL LOOS

## WORLD OF WARCRAFT



WoW subredditor EveClassic reckons that a year subscription covers Blizzard's toilet paper needs for about two weeks. That's based on an estimate of 2,500 people working at the developer's Irvine HQ, and studies on the average defecation rates of US adults. Blizzard has yet to confirm, oddly. ■ **JP**



**ABOVE:** The Drifters kinda look like if David Bowie was assimilated by the Borg.

by various Drifter fleets. However, because of TEST's size and power, these have been more of an inconvenience than anything else – a sentiment that has been echoed by all of the game's biggest factions, including Goonswarm.

"I don't mind adapting during a campaign – the amount of times we've had one of our enemies deploy to attack our home space while we've hit another is very high," says Asher Elias, a fleet commander with Goonswarm speaking to Steven Messner. "I disliked being compelled to go home by CCP design decisions involving NPCs, especially without warning. It's the antithesis of player-driven sandbox content."

"Campaigns this size take months to plan and the work of hundreds of people, so it's not trivial."

"I play for the players, for the players in my alliance, and together we play to compete against other players," says Hedliner, leader of Pandemic Legion, one of EVE's most notorious alliances. "We choose to exist within the player-driven dimension of the game and PvE is largely a means to an end, to obtain ISK to allow us to continue to compete against other players."

"For me, those I play with and those we play against, we seek that human element and interaction. That is what has kept me playing for well over a decade."

**Andy Kelly, Steven Messner**

## Highs & Lows



### HIGHS

#### Keanu Reeves

His appearance in the game increases the chances of a *Cyberpunk 2077* movie says creator Mike Pondsmith. We're into that.

#### Lightsabers

Following criticisms Respawn is making them more like the films.

#### Shenmue III

Ryo's next adventure feels like a Dreamcast game, and we mean that in the best possible way.

### Mordhau

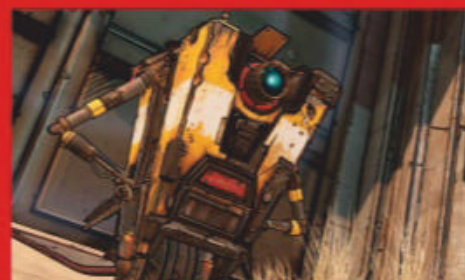
This medieval brawler is superb, but the community is incredibly toxic, which the developer is doing a bad job of dealing with.

#### Gabe Newell

We love you, Gabe, but please stop making *Half-Life 3* jokes. The latest was at the launch of Valve's new VR thing, Index.

#### Borderlands 3

The despicable Claptrap being at the forefront of the game's current marketing push is too much.





# The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

A

s truth becomes increasingly improbable, *The Spy* has difficulty distinguishing between well-founded rumour and the fanciful thoughts that naturally occur in the mind just two days before a magazine deadline.

*Elden Ring*, for instance, might be a name generated by a neural network trained come to up with Tolkien titles forever. Or equally, it could be the next FromSoftware game. Its world will be vast and navigated by horse, but *The Spy* has read enough reports to expect *Shadow of the Colossus* rather than *The Witcher 3*.

Uncharacteristically, it appears George RR Martin has finished providing its “overarching mythos”. But *The Spy* swears that, with a listening device held flat against the monitor, you can still hear him playing for time in the E3 trailer, “The Elden Ring, shattered by someone or something.” *The Spy* suggests filling in the blanks with names inspired by objects within sight, “The Elden Ring, shattered by Vacuum’s Maw or Spiralling Drain.”

Another E3 unknown that scrubs out the line between dream and reality is *Ghostwire: Tokyo* – a Bethesda game based on that one time *The Spy* flew into Japan’s capital on a Monday morning without a wink of sleep and stumbled zombie-like around

Shibuya, wondering if the tourists driving IRL Mario Karts through busy streets were hallucinations or decoy counter-agents. Or perhaps that mental association is simply down to timing. It was Monday morning in Tokyo, after all, when *Ghostwire*’s Creative Director Ikumi Nakamura sprung onstage to introduce the action-adventure game’s spooky debut trailer. Nakamura’s infectious giddiness is one of many unlisted side effects of *The Spy*’s truth serums, which also include a runny tummy and uncomfortably frank conversations with loved ones. Whatever the consequences, Nakamura has since spilled that *Ghostwire*’s Tokyo will be set in the near future and undergoing a “raptured apocalypse”. That closes the file on the rash of disappearances in the teaser, but does it open a new one about heavenly interference?

## THE CHIEF’S BUTT

Acts of god may or may not be within *The Spy*’s remit – although if memory serves, *The Spy*’s job description was burned before reading. Countless missing persons in Tokyo is more than *The Spy* has time for right now, in any case – it’s a full time job just to investigate the disappearance of People Can Fly’s sense of humour. The *Bulletstorm* studio’s new co-op shooter, *Outriders*, has a face stonier than the huge stone gates that slide open in its E3 trailer. Yet the trace of a laugh spiked the readings of *The Spy*’s chucklometer almost a month later – as the studio mentioned to Eurogamer that it still has the rights to *Bulletstorm* and plenty of love for it.

Also up on *The Spy*’s crime board – *Halo Infinite*’s cover art, and not just because *The Spy* likes staring out over an alien landscape through the window of a supersoldier’s thigh gap (no Master Chafe, this one). More than that, the beacons in the distance suggest destinations for your Pelican, perhaps steered by the pilot in E3’s teaser. Could this Halo be more open in structure?

There’s only one way to get closer to the truth and keep out misinformation, and that’s another month spent ogling the Chief’s well-armoured behind for clues. Spy out. ■  
*The Spy*

## THROUGH THE WINDOW OF A SUPERSOLDIER’S THIGH GAP (NO MASTER CHAFE, THIS ONE)

### THE SPY

*The Spy* stores data in the crowd, a network of associates who each know a single word of an important secret.



## This month in... 2009



1 I'm just going to quote this passage from our *Command & Conquer 4* feature: “[EA is] also keen to point out that the end of the tiberium saga doesn’t mean the end of the C&C universe. Given the changes in *Command & Conquer 4*, it may be just the beginning.” I guess, if nothing else, you’ve got to admire the sheer optimism.

ISSUE  
204, September 2009  
ON THE COVER  
*Command & Conquer 4*  
IN THE CHARTS  
I Gotta Feeling – Black Eyed Peas



2 An adventure packed review section, with *The Secret of Monkey Island: SE* (79%), *Tales of Monkey Island: Ep 1* (85%) and *Time Gentlemen, Please* (87%).

3 *PC Gamer* rounds up the best free multiplayer games of 2009, including *Battlefield Heroes*, *Quake Live*, *Puzzle Pirates*, *Kingdom of Loathing* and *Free Realms*. It’s an interestingly timed list given that, just a few months after this issue was published, *League of Legends* would release into open beta and change free-to-play gaming forever.



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# SPACE ODYSSEY

No Code's Creative Director Jon McKellan talks about what he learned recreating a space station for **OBSERVATION**. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

## BUILD-AN-ASTRONAUT

**1** "To simulate actress Kezia Burrows in zero G using mo-cap we used a system where we'd capture her limbs separately and then blend them together. Chris Wilson, lead animator, would also do swimming motions lying down on a stool."

## HOME OFFICE

**2** "On the original ISS, laptops are just stuck to every surface at every angle. Most of these laptops run on DOS and they run one specific programme only, so you don't lose lots of crucial data in case of a malfunction."

## FOUND FOOTAGE

**3** "Cameras on the station are all of the same quality because we wanted tech to feel unreliable as a whole, to give you a sense of unease. The interference and glitches make it feel like they might fail at any minute."

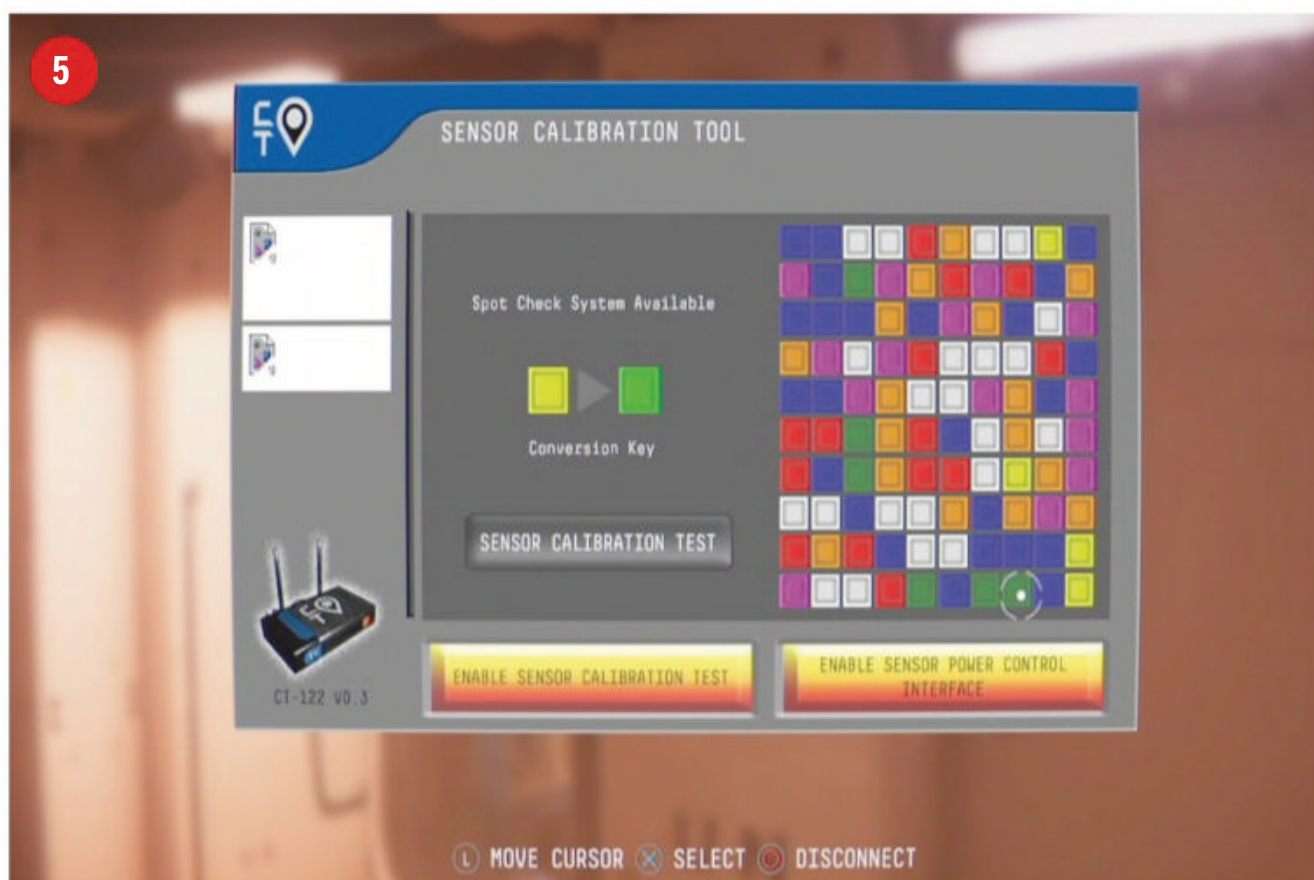
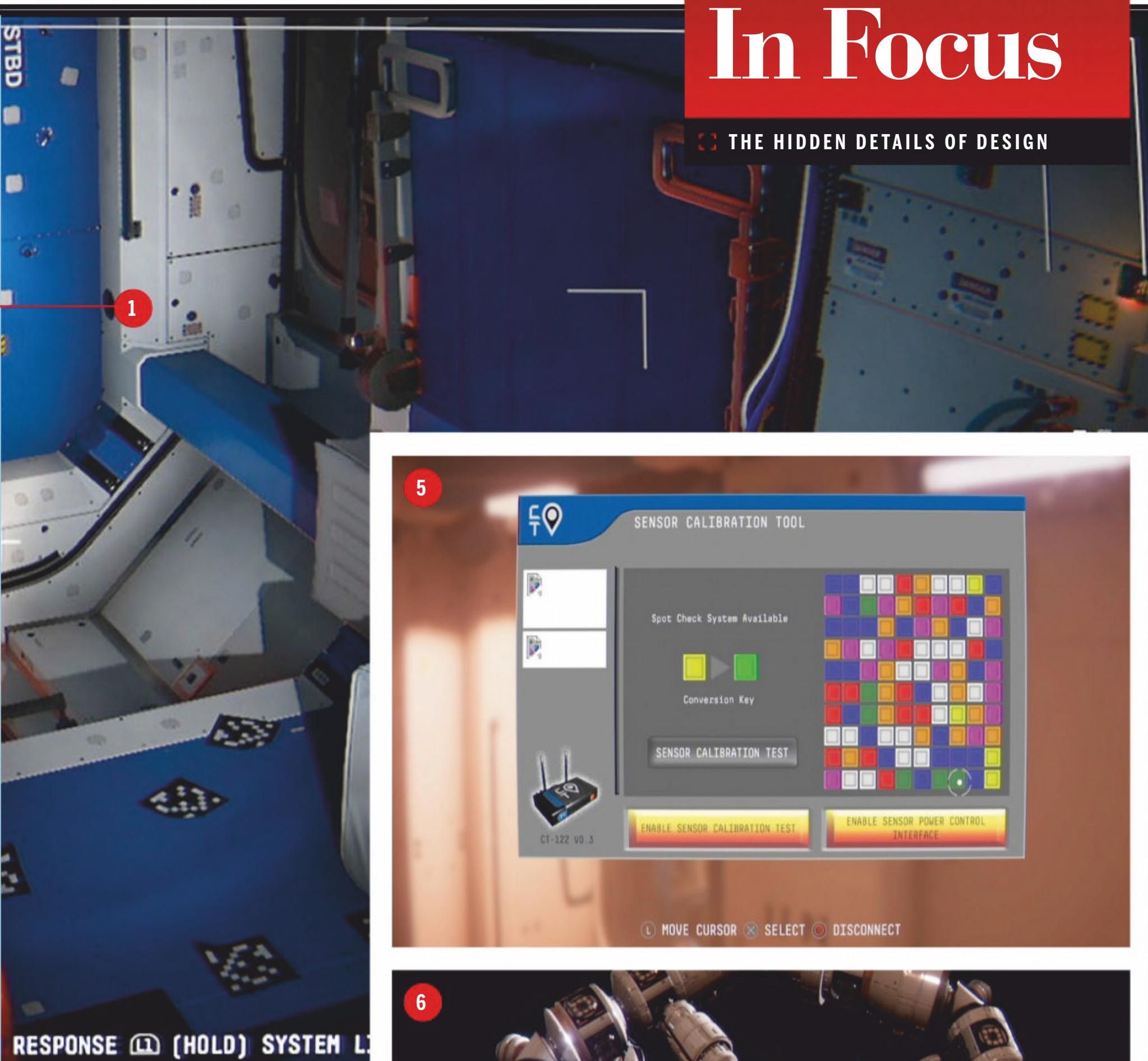
## LITTLE HELPER

**4** "The spheres are based on real technology. Moving around in them can be disorienting because you're suddenly a spherical body experiencing zero G, which is simulated through the camera speed and the drag before you come to a full stop."



# In Focus

THE HIDDEN DETAILS OF DESIGN



## WORK IT OUT

5 "Most of the in-game tech is based on how it looks and handles on the real station. The puzzle is that you've got to work out how to handle an interface that a trained astronaut had years to get used to."

## THE MAIN CHARACTER

6 "We did a lot of research on the ISS over a six-month period. There's many books which detail the building and technology of the ISS. NASA are also incredibly open with their material, their entire photo library is free to use."



## PREVIEW

### Watch Dogs Legion



#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
March 6, 2020

**DEVELOPER**  
Ubisoft Toronto

**PUBLISHER**  
Ubisoft

**LINK**  
[www.watchdogs.com](http://www.watchdogs.com)

## WATCH DOGS LEGION

One of the most impressive E3 demos I've played in years

**L**et me tell you about Abe Welch. He's a hired goon who is now in a hospital. I put him there, after performing a melee takedown on him in Camden Market during a mission in *Watch Dogs Legion*. It was at this point I decided to save him to my collection of tracked people in the game.

A menu screen tells me he hates Dedsec, no surprise after I knocked him out. But, having hacked into the hospital, I can now prioritise his care, which will begin to change his mind. From there I can help him with the other troubles in his life, like his sister who's being harassed. Eventually I will have the chance to win Abe to my cause. If all goes well, he'll have gone from being a random enemy goon to my new playable character.

*Watch Dogs Legion* has no default protagonist. Those rumours about being able to play as any 'NPC' in the game were true – while it takes a little work to recruit each individual to Dedsec, you build up a pool of swappable playable characters. As the Ubisoft E3 conference demo showed, the story will play out with whichever character you chose, voice-acted cutscenes and all. There is a major, brave twist to this however – if that character dies in combat, they are gone forever. Permadeath is now a major part of the *Watch Dogs* experience. You'll have a chance to surrender to your enemies so that doesn't always happen, but I did experience it in my 45-minute demo. I recruited a person, watched her liberate Camden Market from goons (and put Abe Welch in the hospital), then saw her get double crossed and shot dead in front of a massive security force. I was a little bit attached. The game's big idea is working.

It sounds novel, but this system has enormous story-creating potential, and in

PLAYED  
IT

my first hands-on demo, it's made a dazzling impression. *Legion* is set in near future London, after Brexit, and in a reality where blue and white collar jobs have been swept away by automation. The city is in a difficult state following riots and bombings. It's a surprisingly bold choice of setting by Ubisoft – and as a Brit familiar with both London and living through the predictable chaos of Brexit, it's weird that something so close to my reality is now the basis of a dystopian setting in a computer game.

Your antagonist is a private security company called Albion, though, rather than politicians. London here is a kind of broken neon wonderland, full of brightly-lit futuristic streets, but rife with food banks and protestors. There are eight boroughs of London in the game, and I see Camden and Westminster in this demo.

#### GRAN THEFT AUTO

My first playable character is Ashley, a woman old enough to be your gran who struggles to climb over objects. My goal is to have someone new join the cause. The recruitment phase for Dedsec begins in a pub. In addition to the usual *Watch Dogs* information on each NPC in the world, you can also see what trait every potential target has. Their generated background ties in to what these traits are. I chose someone with a melee attack boost, but you'll see all kinds of buffs based around the different things you do in *Watch Dogs*. Recruiting someone is a multi-step process, sped up for this demo. Winning a character over essentially involves completing side content to help persuade them to join the Dedsec cause, with a bar representing their opinion of the group. You'll finally complete an origin mission, which makes them playable.

Once recruited you can assign them to one of three classes, which offer more detailed flexibility of approach than previous games. Enforcer is a gun-focused class, with a combat roll, sticky mines and explosive rounds. Infiltrator has an AR

## IT SOUNDS NOVEL, BUT THIS SYSTEM HAS ENORMOUS STORY-CREATING POTENTIAL



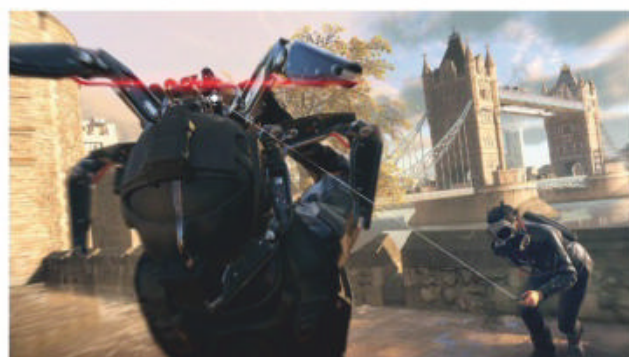
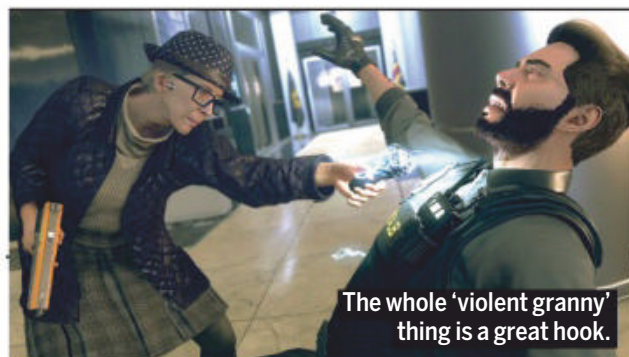






## PREVIEW

### Watch Dogs Legion







» cloak that briefly makes you invisible, as well as dedicated melee abilities, like a shockwave area of effect attack, and the option to hide bodies with an AR shroud. Hackers have spider robots and spider turrets, and the robot kind will jump onto the faces of enemies like the Facehugger in *Alien* to take them out. Each class has its own upgrade tree, and each character individually progresses through them.

You can hack drones in *Watch Dogs Legion* too, and with the larger delivery drones flying across London, you can drop things on top of enemies from the sky, and use them to fly your character around. If you're a stealth or non-lethal player, *Legion* feels well optimised for those playing styles. With five storylines and over 60 missions, there should be plenty of opportunity to experiment until you find the class and character traits you like. And even if you don't care about getting that granular, recruiting an army of pensioners is probably quite fun too.

It's not magic, this NPC recruitment system, but it does offer a very detailed simulation, and it makes *Watch Dogs Legion* feel like it's genuinely innovating. I ask creative director Clint Hocking how many variations and voice actors there are. "That's a complicated question just by itself. We've recorded 20 different what we call 'narrative personas', and those narrative personas all have their own lines written, so it's not just different voices saying the same stuff. They all have different personalities, perspectives and viewpoints, and those are combined with all the other things, the physical animation archetypes and all of that stuff. But roughly, there's 20 major characterisations across the game." That means your recruits will react differently in cutscenes, and that it's much more than just an appearance swap.

The people you meet have their own schedules, family members, jobs, and homes. "There's a huge simulation. It's not just that we create random characters, they all have their own lives and they all have their needs and wants and opinions about Dedsec, the factions and all of that stuff. So when you interact with that simulation, it's not player-centric. The simulation keeps moving. If you kill

someone – you see a man and a wife and you kill the guy's wife – he's not going to go to his appointment with his wife any more, he's going to go to the graveyard instead for a little while. And then after a little time, when he's done his mourning, he'll have a new thing to do in that part of his schedule. He'll have a new friend, or a new problem or whatever. All of it keeps moving forward all the time."

## RESURREXIT

I had a granular question for Hocking, off the back of the demo. Let's say one of your playable characters gets put in hospital, and you use another character to prioritise their healthcare. Would that improve the opinion of Dedsec to the family of your hospitalised character, and make them potentially easier to recruit? Does it go that far? "It does go that deep, yep. The best way to answer your question is to say once you recruit people into your team, they're not removed from the simulation. They're going to keep walking around the world, living their lives and having their friends and family. And yeah, if one of our operatives gets captured by an enemy who's decided to take revenge, and you go and free them, their family will be positively impacted by you having freed them, just as if it was a character in the world."

Whereas *Watch Dogs* and its sequel offered a slightly superficial glance at the people in the city surrounding you, here they're the stars, and you're supposed to get invested in them. By adding permadeath, the developers are truly testing your affection for the characters you've recruited. Imagine someone you spent 20 exciting hours with is shot to death then gone forever – it's potentially a lot more devastating than, say, picking one of three characters to die at the end of *GTA 5*. It could be Ashley, the frail old lady who guides spider bots into secured buildings, or it could be Abe Welch, your former goon turned hero.

Ubisoft isn't saying anything about what happens when you play online in *Legion*, just that singleplayer is the 'springboard' into that experience. Just 45 minutes in this city full of potential heroes has captured my imagination, though, and made me want to test how far the simulation can go. This feels like something I've never seen before in an open world game. I didn't play anything else this E3 that surprised and delighted me this much.

Samuel Roberts

**IMAGINE SOMEONE YOU SPENT 20 EXCITING HOURS WITH IS SHOT TO DEATH**



## PREVIEW

### *Dying Light 2*



#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
Spring 2020

**DEVELOPER**  
Techland

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**LINK**  
[www.dyinglightgame.com](http://www.dyinglightgame.com)

## DYING LIGHT 2

Techland's zombie sequel has no time for indecision

**I** am an indecisive gamer. Give me a choice between two different rewards and I will tab out to research which one is better. Give me an option between two quest resolutions and I'll scour forums to figure out how each will affect the game. "Do you want to murder this person for no reason or reward?" Er, not really, but let me just check a wiki real quick.

Based on this fact, *Dying Light 2* is either the worst game I could play or the perfect form of immersion therapy.

Let's start at the end of the hands-off E3 demo I saw, because it features exactly the sort of big, impactful choice guaranteed to afflict me with gaming paralysis. The mission of the demo was to restore drinking water to one of the seven districts of The City. The ultimate choice is between working with a local warlord – called the Colonel – on a long term solution, or fighting the Colonel and opening the floodgates of the dam he controls. In the demo, we saw the consequences of immediate gratification.

After dealing with the Colonel's goons, protagonist Aiden rushes to the control room of the Colonel's castle, and activates a switch to open the floodgates. In a cutscene we see the water draining, revealing a previously flooded district. The demo ends with a new type of infected emerging from the soil.

Had we instead decided to work with the Colonel, the dam would have never been opened, and the district would have remained underwater. You could still

explore it, but it wouldn't have the same importance to your campaign. "If you really uncover it then people start appearing there and you get quests from them," explains Tymon Smektała, lead designer for *Dying Light 2*. "They uncover something within that district which will need your exploration and investigation."

Such big, map-wide changes aren't the only way your choices will manifest in-game. Earlier in the demo, Aiden's friend Frank is shot by what he assumes to be the Colonel's soldiers. He's given a choice between chasing the truck to the Colonel's island, or staying and helping Frank. "This is a huge moment because it changes the flow of everything," says Smektała. "You don't try to go to the island at this point. You're just trying to save Frank, so it's a completely different mission that happens. Then you have to find a different way to get onto the island." In the demo, Aiden decides to pursue the truck. Later, he's told that Frank has died.

#### DECISIONS, DECISIONS

The decisions in your campaign will also define the gear you can upgrade and the weapon blueprints that you'll find. "If you make specific choices you will not get access to electric modifications to your weapons, or you will not get access to grenades, or you will not get access to some kind of potion that allows you to ... deal more damage," explains Smektała.

Those blueprints are going to be an important part of defining your playstyle, because *Dying Light 2* is all about making the most of the limited resources at your disposal. Aiden chases the truck, running across the rooftops that run parallel to the wide streets of The City's second district. Suddenly, a section of roof collapses, and he falls into the skyscraper below. It's dark, and full of infected. In the ensuing escape, I get a sense of *Dying Light 2*'s survival mechanics. Enemies are quick and deadly, weapons are unreliable and every action uses your stamina bar.

With so many choices, and so many possible outcomes and play styles, *Dying Light 2* is saying that it's OK to follow your heart. Because whatever you choose, you won't see everything it has to offer in a single playthrough.

*Phil Savage*

Just like paper beats rock, electrified knife beats knife.



Sparing certain characters can lead to new routes.

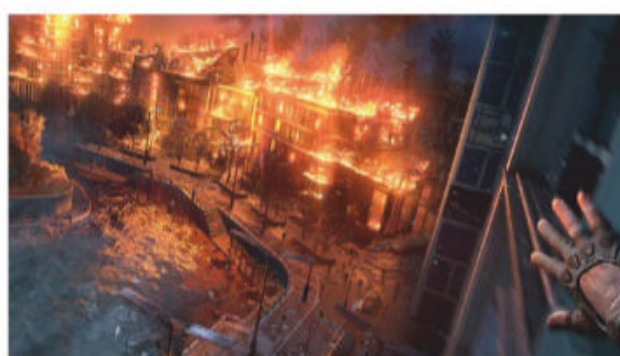


## THE DEMO ENDS WITH A NEW TYPE OF INFECTED EMERGING FROM THE SOIL





The rave scene takes its toll.



The Colonel has a choice for you.



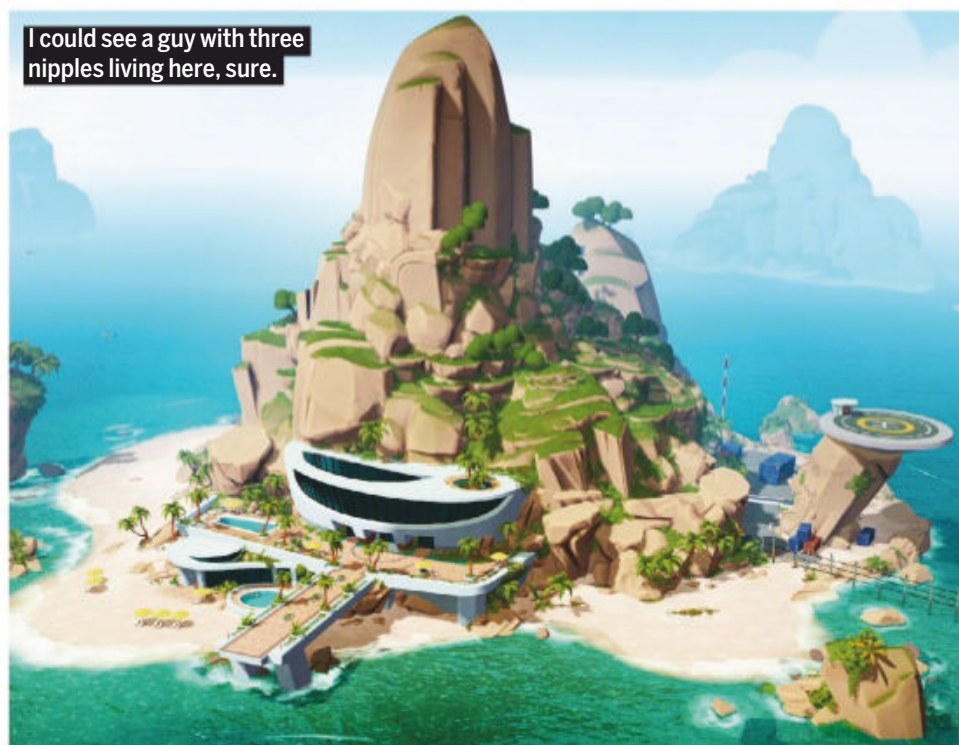
## PREVIEW

### *Evil Genius 2: World Domination*

Characters from the 2004 original reappear, if you can remember them.



I could see a guy with three nipples living here, sure.



The first proper look at what it's like in-game.



*Evil Genius 2: World Domination*

## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2020DEVELOPER  
RebellionPUBLISHER  
In-houseLINK  
[www.evilgeniusgame.com](http://www.evilgeniusgame.com)

# EVIL GENIUS 2: WORLD DOMINATION

A lair simulator with *Two Point Hospital* vibes

**O**ne of the more unusual games at E3 was this sequel to a lair-building simulator from a defunct developer. *Evil Genius 2* slots into the landscape of *Cities: Skylines* and *Two Point Hospital*, with a cartoony art style that swerves clear of looking like a mobile game.

Your aim is to build an evil lair, and eventually, a doomsday device to go with it. You build a base, train up henchmen, defend your lair from spies and aim to conquer the world. Rebellion's goal is to make a game that has the original's feeling – it retains many of the characters, and a similar tone – but make it appealing to new players.

"It was about revisiting every element of the game and deciding, does this still hold up?" says producer Ash Tregay. "Are players' expectations different now? How can we improve this? So areas where we've made tweaks would be things like the AI, the most obvious one. In *Evil Genius 1*, you might be waiting a while for your orders to get obeyed. In *Evil Genius 2*, we've been very keen to make sure that even though it might take a while for say construction to complete, nonetheless as soon as I hit confirm, go and build this stuff, you can see the reactions of minions who will then start carrying out your orders. So that level of feedback has been important."

I ask if the fan base for *Evil Genius* has continued growing since the game

launched 15 years ago. "I don't think it would be truthful to say it's constantly gaining, like this new snowballing effect of players," says Tregay. "But we have seen a steady stream of people continue to play and enjoy it on Steam. The Steam forums and subreddit are still active places. I think that the key thing about *Evil Genius* is its ability to retain a fanbase. You've had people who have been continually playing it for 15 years on and off."

## DEN OF INIQUITY

While Rebellion itself didn't work on the original, the team is composed of people who want to replicate its unique flavour. "One of the prerequisites for getting on the team for a number of our key members was a knowledge and passion for the original game," says Tregay. "So in fact it's the crux of how our lead designer Rich [Edwards] got his job. I have yet to meet anyone who has the same level of working knowledge of the original game and a real, real passion for it. And it's also about getting a team together who are really keen to work in this art style. It's obviously quite different for a Rebellion title, and we're keen to get a group of people who really get the fun and the silliness and the satire of the *Evil Genius* universe."

While this build is early and hands-off, it's promising. The quality of the characters and animation remind me of something like *Two Point Hospital*, which the team paid careful attention to. "When *Two Point Hospital* came up," says Tregay, "we took a couple of days and said 'let's all play this as a team, then get together and discuss what we really like and what we can take forward from this, and where we would like to see the similarities in our own game'. There's a great passion for management games."

Rebellion has owned *Evil Genius* since 2006, but now, as many other sim games have found their footing on PC, this seems to be the right time for a follow-up. "I think what we've been saying is it's the right time," explains Tregay. "The Paradox titles, Frontier, *Two Point Hospital* last year, there's a renaissance for this type of title in the marketplace. And yet there still isn't anything quite like *Evil Genius* out there, which are all good things for us."

Samuel Roberts

**REBELLION'S GOAL IS TO  
MAKE A GAME THAT HAS  
THE ORIGINAL'S FEELING**





## PREVIEW

### Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order



This is why you don't buy your lightsaber in instalments.

#### NEED TO KNOW

##### RELEASE

November 15, 2019

##### DEVELOPER

Respawn Entertainment

##### PUBLISHER

EA

##### LINK

[www.bit.ly/jedi-fo](http://www.bit.ly/jedi-fo)

## STAR WARS JEDI: FALLEN ORDER

A touch of *Sekiro* sends Cal and BD-1 backtracking

**I** came into my hands-on time with *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* at E3 expecting more or less George Lucas' *Uncharted* – a gorgeous-but-conventional linear Star Wars action game. But what I played had a few unexpected shades of *Metroid's* backtracking and FromSoftware's secret areas.

To be clear *Jedi: Fallen Order* is not an open-world game. You've got your own ship, the Mantis, and any time that it's accessible to you, you can walk inside, visit a holotable to bring up a galactic map, and jump to one of the other planets you've visited. But (despite the presence of a crew you can engage with using simple either/or dialogue) you are not going to be zipping between these worlds as in *Mass Effect*, running side-quest errands.

Instead, travelling between the planets in *Jedi: Fallen Order* – about half of which are new to Star Wars – seems to be in service to upgrade accumulation and completionism. "A lot of the time you'll play through a chunk of a planet and run into a wall," says Justin Perez, senior game designer at Respawn. "You might just decide the enemies are a little too strong. Go back to your ship, go explore somewhere else, come back – maybe now you have Force Push. And those enemies are weak to Force Push."

Though Jedi powers unlock in tandem with plot progression, smaller upgrades for Padawan Cal Kestis are purchased with points – one of a couple of different

collectible resources that feed into *Jedi: Fallen Order's* backtracking and modest non-linearity. You can find audio logs, as well as cosmetic skins for Cal's shoulder droid BD-1, the Mantis, and Cal himself.

In the demo I played I encountered an uncrossable gap inside a mud-covered base. After discovering a workbench that unlocked the Droid Overcharge ability for BD-1, I was able to then return to this area, zap a control panel, and wall-run across a new panel that had rotated into place in order to move forward.

#### THERE IS NO TRY

"Sometimes you'll need to open a gate in order to progress through Cal's main adventure," Perez says. "But other times, you'll open the gate to find a miniboss in there, and then maybe a skin that you can apply. There's a lot of customisation stuff that you'll find in those optional paths. You can change your lightsaber hilt. That's all off the beaten path."

Secret areas and alternate paths also seem to factor into combat. Near the end of my demo, I stumbled upon five or six stormtroopers and some giant

Kashyyykian spiders, all brawling together without noticing me. I got my ass kicked when I waded into the fight, only escaping by hitting the d-pad to spend the Jedi equivalent of

Estus flasks and restore my health. It turned out that I could've avoided this carefully-designed encounter entirely.

"There's a way you can sneak into the caves on the left," Perez tells me. "And you can just let that whole fight happen and not even participate at all."

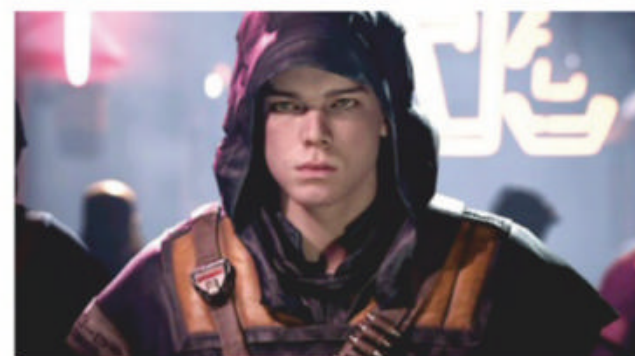
Respawn's approach to combat is likewise influenced by FromSoftware. It was fun playing a deliberately-paced Star Wars game where button-mashing meant death against anything but the lowest-tier enemies. *Jedi: Fallen Order* is much more forgiving than *Sekiro*, but I still had to precisely time parries.

I'm curious how this more careful lightsabering will jive with Cal's power upgrades – will he be chucking Force Lightning by the end of the game, or acrobatically pinballing around like Yoda? My guess is that his magic will be more restrained than that, given the deliberate fighting style that Respawn is leaning into.

*Evan Lahti*

PLAYED IT

## SECRET AREAS AND ALTERNATE PATHS ALSO SEEM TO FACTOR INTO COMBAT

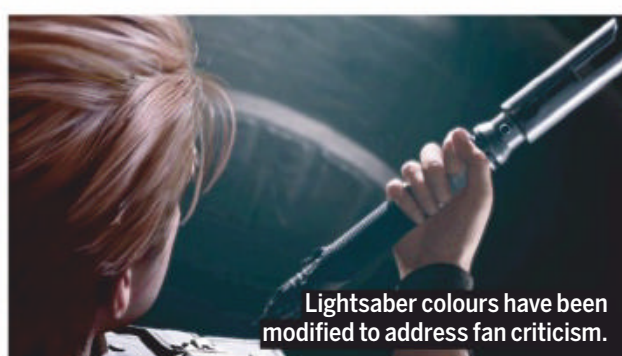


Droids aren't all bumbling charm, you know.





"FIGHT UNBALANCED,  
Y NO FIX RESPORN"



Lightsaber colours have been  
modified to address fan criticism.



## PREVIEW

### Marvel's Avengers



This game looks like it's too big to fail.

#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
May 15, 2020

**DEVELOPER**  
Crystal Dynamics

**PUBLISHER**  
Square Enix

**LINK**  
[www.playavengers.com](http://www.playavengers.com)

## MARVEL'S AVENGERS

Square Enix's E3 demo didn't exactly look heroic

**T**here was an air of disappointment around the look of Square Enix's *Avengers* game when it was announced. The slightly muted colour palette of *Marvel's Avengers* approximates the look of the Marvel films rather than the comics, but without the actors playing those roles, it ends up looking like an uncanny, slightly drab cover version.

Seeing more of the game in action behind closed doors at E3 – about 20 minutes of an early mission – couldn't overcome that initial reaction to capture my imagination. But the long-term ambition at play here is very exciting, and this is only a tiny introduction to what Crystal Dynamics and company have planned.

This hands-off demo takes place during A-Day in San Francisco, a celebration of all things Avengers. As the reveal footage showed, an attack gets pinned on the heroes, Captain America is seemingly dead, and the team goes on hiatus for five years. That's where the rest of the game begins, as you rebuild the team in a world where superheroes are outlawed. In the demo, I see a mission that showcases the Avengers in action on A-Day, just as it's all going to hell.

We start with Thor, who does all the things you'd want the God of Thunder to do. This demo pits him against a lot of generic-looking army guys (a fixture of the demo generally), who he hits liberally with his hammer in a way that would certainly result in their deaths. He's got an area of effect attack that shocks everyone in its radius with lightning, and he can throw his hammer at enemies then recall it, swatting other enemies along the way much like the axe in the PS4's *God of War*.

The mission then takes us through sequences of gameplay with the other characters. Iron Man can fire sticky

bombs at enemies and unleash his chest laser, which I'm near certain killed a lot of people in this demo. The Hulk bounds across the Golden Gate bridge, picking up a generic army dude and using him as a weapon to beat other army dudes. He'll slam two enemies into one another, and he can rip out a lump of concrete and use that to damage enemies as well. Black Widow can use her pistols at long range, plus she has an acrobatic leg throw ability that will remind you of the character's fighting style in the Avengers films.

The action swaps between them as the mission goes on, which is a neat conceit, even if we never really see the heroes interacting in-game in the demo. You see the other Avengers off in the background, but this demo doesn't sell the sense of them working together as a team. And the action just isn't that exciting to watch, even with all those different special abilities in play.

#### AVENGERS... ASSOCIATE!

Maybe it's that the Avengers' combat and camera positioning just made me think of the *Batman Arkham* games straight off, though with no use of counterattacks. Even though all the Avengers' moves look fantastic, fighting these forgettable enemies didn't look so exciting that it stopped me from zoning out during Captain America's duels aboard a doomed helicarrier. I definitely don't mind the game's combat reminding me of the *Arkham* games, but this gameplay didn't demonstrate enough twists on that formula to get me truly excited.

I do appreciate that the combat in *Marvel's Avengers* is not all about melee, though, as Iron Man and Black Widow have longer range attacks and several characters can fly. It's just that the basic close-range punching doesn't look that fun. And I really love the Avengers movies. This game should be a slam dunk for me. We are almost an entire year away from release, though, which is a long time to refine what was shown here.

**I REALLY LOVE THE AVENGERS MOVIES. THIS GAME SHOULD BE A SLAM DUNK FOR ME**







## PREVIEW

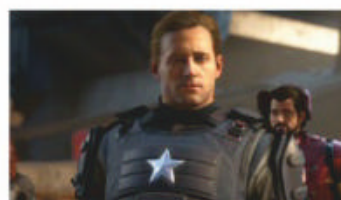
### *Marvel's Avengers*



If you like large green men, it's gonna be a good time.







➤ Another disappointment for me is that *Marvel's Avengers* has quick time events. These are underwhelming in this demo, and make it look like some of the most exciting moments are happening away from the actual in-game action.

Towards the end of this level, Black Widow fights the Marvel villain Taskmaster in a multi-part boss battle. At one point, Natasha grabs onto her opponent while he's flying his jetpack over the near-destroyed Golden Gate bridge. A QTE prompt lets her punch him, over and over again, but it's more of a drag than a peak. These moments make the game look more outdated than it probably is.

As Crystal Dynamics' head of studio Scot Amos points out when I ask why they added QTEs to the game, *Avengers* is meant to be played by everyone, "For us, this audience is so broad. This isn't just some hardcore gamer's game." Matching button prompts to specific actions is meant to remind players of the controls in a natural way, too. "It's a way for us to integrate QTEs in a kind of tutorialised way. They're also cinematic moments we want to make sure land from a narrative perspective. So there might be a point where we use them just to give that moment for players to get the best experience on the narrative side." I see the logic to that even if I'm not fond of QTEs.

I was disappointed by this demo, then, but it's clearly such a brief slice of what Crystal Dynamics has in the works. I see a perfectly fine action game with high production values, but I'm not sure what would motivate people to play it over a long period of time.

In my interview with Amos, though, I'm more encouraged by the long-term vision for the game: more characters, more levels and more story over multiple years, all without any extra charge, which almost sounds too good to be true.

"We're not joking when we say, for years to come," Amos says. "And we're not joking when we say every new superhero and every new region comes at no additional cost. We want you to buy into this, learn what this world is, and then we want to keep feeding that audience new heroes, new stories, new places to explore. We do really mean it. This is

multiple years of new stories and new evolutions of these superheroes."

Amos explains how the single and multiplayer elements work in tandem. "The game is structured like a lot of Crystal Dynamics games in the past where you have a bespoke singleplayer campaign," and co-op sounds like it's layered on top of that, with specific missions earmarked for that kind of play. "But we have all these branches that go off of that main narrative, where the characters you've unlocked at that point, you can actually play alone. Or you can have friends pile in and do a lot of those missions in multiplayer. So we actually have tons of content, [like a] bespoke campaign, these branching stories, these other arcs you can build that you can play individually – 90 per cent of our content will be singleplayer – but you can also do most of those missions in multiplayer."

For clarification, "branching stories" doesn't mean BioWare-esque choices. It's more just a comment on the structure of missions in the game.

## AVENGERS... ASSESSMENT!

I also start to get a sense of what *Avengers'* endgame, so to speak, will be in relation to the campaign. "We have so much we want to talk about when we start showing more and more of the multiplayer stuff, but from our side, these characters, you can level them up. You can customise their skills, their look, the gear that they have. Those characters are your persistent element, that go down all the other stories and pathways we want to add as you go through the world. So for us, there's a state of the world that will happen at the end of our core campaign that sets up the rest of what's going to happen, and then there'll be changes to that world as more things unlock and more stories come along."

It sounds ambitious, but what I saw at E3 doesn't really hint at that ambition. It just looks like a short slice of a decent enough third-person action game that happens to feature multiple characters. The reveal would have benefited from being more comprehensive in my opinion, connecting the dots between this one level of set pieces and the scope of this overall years-long plan. A game starring these characters, by this collection of strong developers, should be a surefire win. Hopefully, as we learn more about what sounds like a massive game, it will start to come together.

*Samuel Roberts*

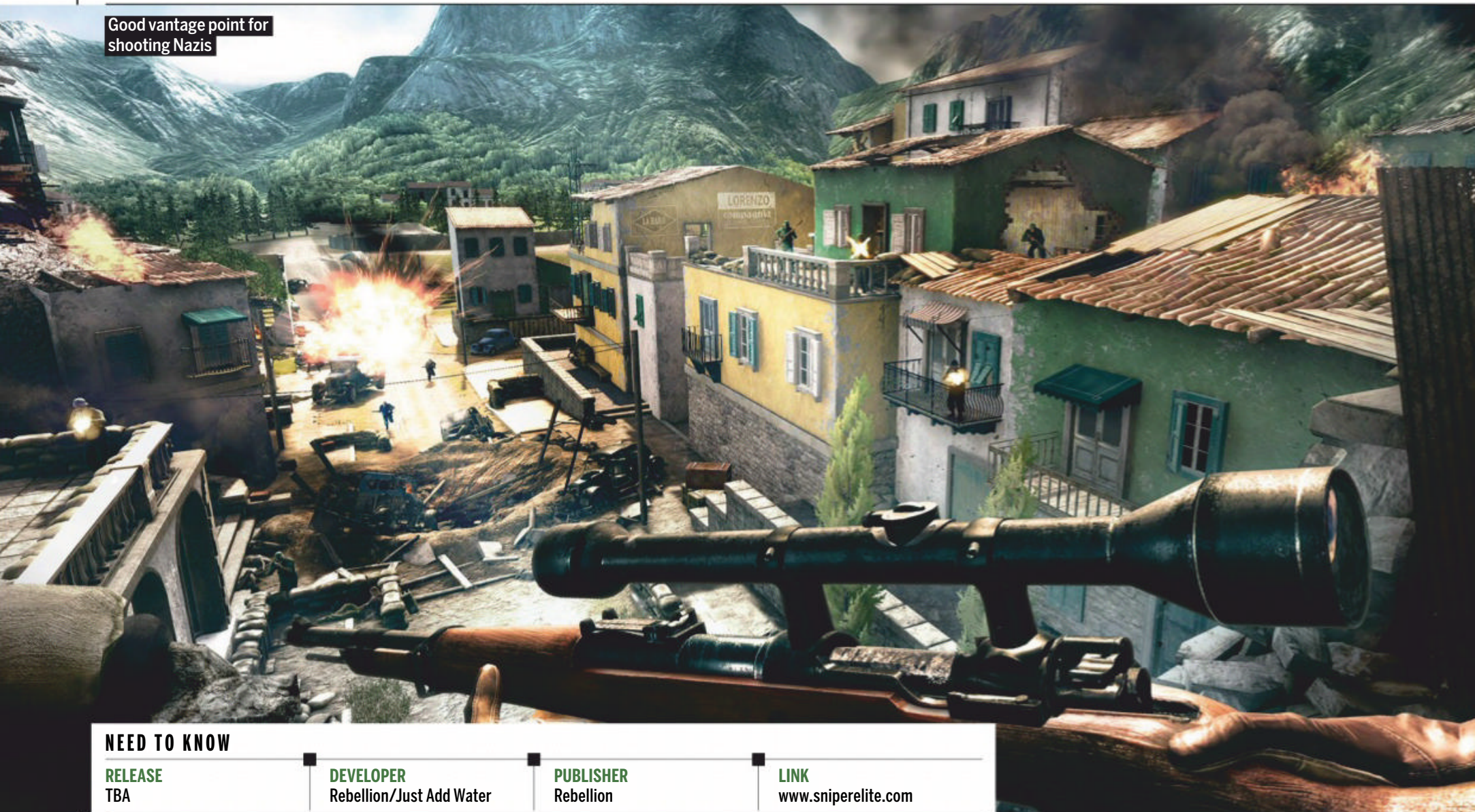
## IT SOUNDS AMBITIOUS, BUT WHAT I SAW DOESN'T REALLY HINT AT THAT AMBITION



## PREVIEW

### Sniper Elite VR

Good vantage point for shooting Nazis



#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
TBA

**DEVELOPER**  
Rebellion/Just Add Water

**PUBLISHER**  
Rebellion

**LINK**  
[www.sniperelite.com](http://www.sniperelite.com)

## SNIPER ELITE VR

Half the fun is just holding the rifle

**A**t E3, you end up playing builds of games that are coming to PC, but not necessarily demoed on them. For *Sniper Elite VR*, I was playing on a PlayStation 4 with that console's gun controller – and that's how I ended up poking myself in the face while I was trying to aim my gun at some Nazis. I guess that means I was getting a bit too into it.

PLAYED IT

This demo is nice and simple. It's basically a shooting gallery from a rooftop, though you can freely move around to get better angles on your targets, and it's a good representation of how aiming and shooting works in VR. There are essentially two stages to aiming in *Sniper Elite VR*: you need to hold the rifle to your eye line correctly, otherwise the game will show you the inside of the scope. Then, of course, you need to actually aim while you're holding the rifle steady. Collectively, those two elements make the weapon in your hands feel nice and real.



The X-ray killcam returns from other games in the series, only now you get the bizarre sensation of enjoying each kill in VR. There's no shortage of shooting gallery games in VR, of course, but it feels like Rebellion's expertise in making sniping games is what you're getting here. The essential elements from *Sniper Elite* seem to have made it across. You're playing as a member of the Italian resistance, trying to oust the Nazi threat from Sicily this time.

#### DRAWING BEADS

"I was a bit concerned whether the *Sniper Elite* experience would translate into VR when we were first discussing it, because I was really concerned about the killcam, for example, and how that

would work," says Rebellion CEO and creative director Jason Kingsley. "And I was quite concerned about how you would aim and all that.

"So I was dubious at the beginning when we were talking about it, but I really like VR. VR is to me a kind of a new medium, because it's a relatively unexplored game space.

"I imagine it's a bit like mountaineers suddenly discovering a whole new range of mountains that nobody knew about and 'Wow, how exciting is that?'

"We're still fighting with it as a medium, we're still trying to find the grammar that helps us understand how to make a game in that space. We had to unlearn a lot of things, and reinvent things."

If I had one issue with the build, aiming at far away enemies is blurrier than I'd like, but that's more of a limitation of the hardware than anything. It feels like the essential elements from *Sniper Elite* are here to me, and it's likely that fans of the series will get a kick out of how the guns feel in first-person VR.

*Samuel Roberts*

## NOW YOU GET THE BIZARRE SENSATION OF ENJOYING EACH KILL IN VR



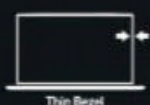


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## PREVIEW

### Zombie Army 4: Dead War



#### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2020

DEVELOPER  
Rebellion

PUBLISHER  
In-house

LINK  
[www.zombiearmy.com](http://www.zombiearmy.com)

## ZOMBIE ARMY 4: DEAD WAR

Prevent Hitler's return from hell in this new *Sniper Elite* spin-off

**H**itler is making his play to return from hell in *Zombie Army 4: Dead War*, which is where players left him at the end of *Zombie Army Trilogy*. At E3 2019, this latest *Sniper Elite* standalone spin-off offered a fun demo of zombie shooting – another moreish four-player co-op shooter to join the growing ranks that have emerged since *Left 4 Dead 2*.

My PC demo was actually in singleplayer, and I played as *Sniper Elite* protagonist Karl, who's among several other returning characters in this entry. That means I carry a sniper rifle and shotgun, but on top of that I have an electric fist melee attack for knocking zombies back. There's an '80s genre movie influence hanging over the game, which is most noticeable in the moody John Carpenter-esque music.

*Sniper Elite*'s kill cam returns in *Dead Army*, along with an explosive cam for when you kill a lot of zombies at once, (say with the careful placement of an explosive). You'll also encounter different variants of zombie, naturally, with exploding undead turning up towards the end of this demo. There's a lot of satisfaction in picking them off from a distance through a sniper scope. Nothing about what I play feels particularly new, but it's a very pretty game that captures a lot of what I currently enjoy about playing co-op shooters on PC.

Upgrades are important in *Zombie Army 4*, which take the form of weapon enhancements, cosmetics, special

attacks and even emotes. "The biggest thing we wanted to build upon was the player progression side of things," says lead designer Ryan Baker. "We really wanted to add to the perks and the way you can pick the abilities. You can get abilities that will let you rip the heavy machine gun off a turret and move around with it, or you might want to go down the route of combat medic." Abilities include the likes of Second Chance, where you can keep death at bay by landing last-second kills to keep yourself going, which is particularly handy if you're attempting the game in singleplayer.

Characters will interact with each other during missions this time, which is something that fellow co-op shooter *Vermintide II* does really well. "One of the big changes this time around is [the characters have] got dialogue throughout the game," Baker says. "They'll talk to each other, reacting to what's going on. So if someone gets a particularly high combo or something, one of the characters will say something about how well they're doing, then another character might chip in with a retort. They'll also have narrative conversations if a big event has happened during some quieter moments. All of that has added a lot to our characters."

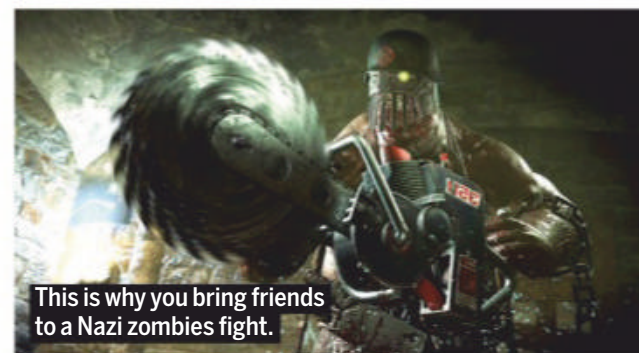
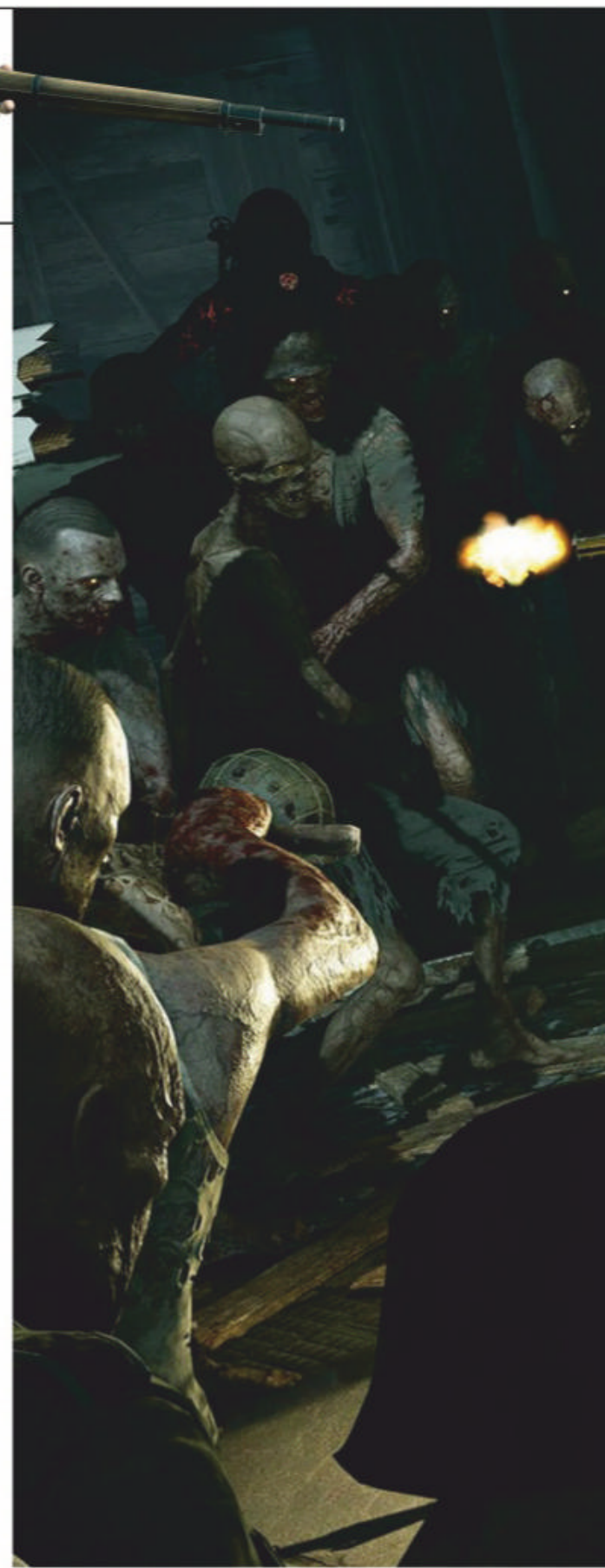
PLAYED  
IT

#### IN THE HEAD

Rebellion won't be drawn on how long the game is, but expect what's described as a "meaty campaign", with larger levels than those seen in the *Zombie Army Trilogy*. "We're set in and around southern Europe, Italy and surrounding areas in the Mediterranean," says head of creative Tim Jones. "In the trailer you'll have seen Venice, which is certainly a fun level with all the waterways, and we start the game in Milan as you've seen in the demo. There is a derelict zoo in there as well. It varies wildly from apocalyptic cities and towns to rural areas and forests and swamps."

I'm hoping *Zombie Army 4* follows the *Sniper Elite* series' trajectory of steady improvements between games. In an otherwise quiet E3 for playable big hitters, *Dead Army* was one of the easier sells to me: solid, nice-looking zombie shooting with weighty guns and silly powers that I wouldn't mind sharing with friends.

*Samuel Roberts*



This is why you bring friends to a Nazi zombies fight.

## THERE'S A LOT OF SATISFACTION IN PICKING THEM OFF FROM A DISTANCE



*Zombie Army 4: Dead War*



One of those screenshot angles you'll never, ever see in-game.



These lads want to bring Hitler back. Stop them!



The killcam returns, this time with zombie decay.



## PREVIEW

### *Desperados III*

Plan accordingly and it might turn out alright. It might not, of course.

#### NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
2019

**DEVELOPER**  
Mimimi Productions

**PUBLISHER**  
THQ Nordic

**LINK**  
[www.desperadosgame.com](http://www.desperadosgame.com)

## DESPERADOS III

### *Shadow Tactics* moves to the Wild West

**I**t can be nerve wracking playing a hands-on E3 demo in full view of one its designers – particularly one for a PC game that delights in its difficulty. You've got a short amount of time to figure out the controls, intuit the most effective route forward and exude an air of basic competence.

PLAYED IT

Luckily, for *Desperados III*, I already had some experience. Not from my distant recollections of playing *Desperados: Wanted Dead or Alive* some 18 years ago, but rather developer Mimimi's previous game, *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun*. *Desperados III* may be a prequel to the classic stealth series, but it feels like the follow-up to the studio's lauded Edo period sneak-'em-up (itself inspired by both *Desperados* and the earlier *Commandos* games. Snake, meet tail).

In the main mission of the demo, series lead John Cooper is riding a train that's attacked by what seems like a small army

of robbers. I make my way across the winding cliffs along the side of the train, making use of John's endless supply of coins to create distractions through which I can slip silently by, or his throwing knife to take down any bandits in my path.

#### DAMMIT JOHN

About halfway through the level, John meets up with one of *Desperados*' other main characters, Doc McCoy. It's a terse encounter, but the two eventually agree to work together. Doc is armed with a sniper rifle and poison syringe, but his most useful ability is a booby-trapped medical bag that he can throw into an enemy's vision cone. When they approach to investigate the bag, it delivers a payload of poison gas into their face.

### IT WAS THE DEMO'S FINAL REVELATION THAT HAD ME THE MOST EXCITED

With two characters under my control, the patrols ramp up in size and complexity. This is where I get to try out *Desperados III*'s new and improved version of *Shadow Tactics*' shadow mode, which lets players queue up actions to be performed by multiple characters simultaneously. In the *Desperados* version you select actions in much the same way – pressing the Shift key to select an ability and target – but now you're able to activate characters independently of each other via hotkeys for each action.

It's a tweak I'd long wished for while playing *Shadow Tactics*, but it was the demo's final revelation that had me the most excited. After my mission was over, I was shown a small slice of *Desperados III*'s version of New Orleans. It's a massive, bustling space. What's more, only specific parts of the map are restricted. Much of it you will be able to explore, discovering rumours and completing side objectives.

*Desperados III* feels like a confident return for the series, and – perhaps more importantly – an exciting successor to the already excellent *Shadow Tactics*.

*Phil Savage*



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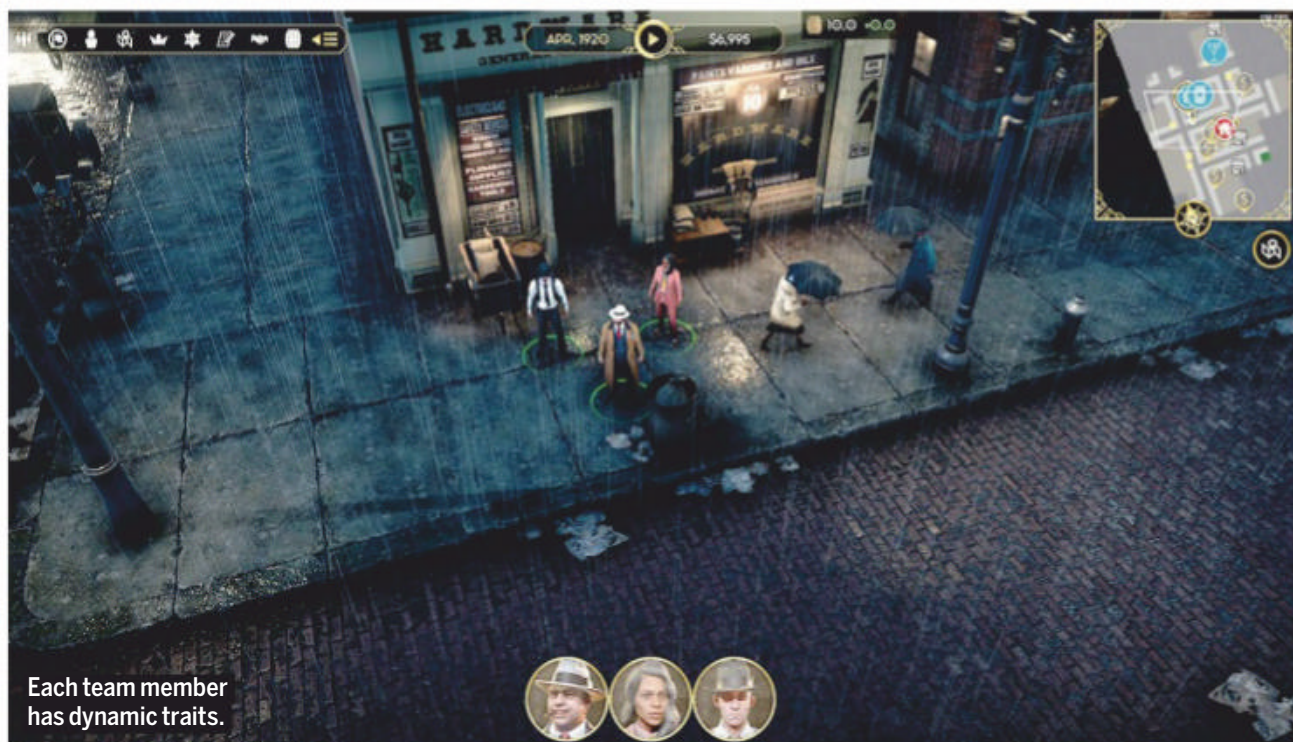
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## PREVIEW

### *Empire of Sin*

Booze: keeping crims in trenchcoats since 1920.







## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2020DEVELOPER  
Romero GamesPUBLISHER  
Paradox InteractiveLINK  
[www.empireofsingame.com](http://www.empireofsingame.com)

## EMPIRE OF SIN

Alcohol is everything in Romero Games' prohibition-era game

**E**mpire of Sin was perhaps the most pleasant surprise of my E3 this year. Announced as part of the Nintendo Direct stream, I had assumed it would be a casual, console-friendly strategy that would offer little to PC enthusiasts. Having now seen it in action, I can confidently say I was wrong.

It's the 1920s, prohibition is in effect, and wannabe kingpins are jostling for a slice of Chicago's booming bootlegging scene. In *Empire of Sin* you pick one of 14 such bosses, most of whom are based on classic American gangsters such as Al Capone, Dean O'Banion and Stephanie St Clair. Each boss will offer their own traits, including combat abilities, and empire and diplomatic bonuses.

In a hands-off demo, designer Ian O'Neill picks Al Capone, and immediately proceeds to show off one of his signatures: his Thompson submachine gun, aka the Tommy Gun, aka The Chicago Typewriter, aka Big Al's Chonky Bullet Friend (OK, I made that last one up). After establishing his HQ, Capone immediately walks over to a speakeasy run by a neighbouring gang, the Meat Packers. Pulling out his gun, the action switches to a turn-based combat style instantly familiar to any *XCOM* fan.

One of Capone's moves – thanks to his signature weapon – is the sweep attack, firing off bullets in a wide arc and instantly bringing down one of the Meat Packers' goons. Capone finishes the other off with a brutal, execution-style kill. O'Neill

explains that *Empire of Sin* features dynamic behaviours, and, by overusing execution attacks, characters will gain the cruel trait. And, if they continue to do it, they'll actually become serial killers.

I perk up at the mention of traits and dynamic behaviours. I've seen plenty of *XCOM*-a-like combat systems, but the real meat of a great strategy game is a detailed simulation ticking away in the background. *Empire of Sin* seems to realise this. As you build your empire, you'll meet what Romero Games is calling RPCs – recruitable player characters – who can fill roles in your underworld org chart. These characters will all have their own dynamic traits and relationships – and will react to the choices that you make and the promotions you hand out.

## THE BODYGUARD

Based on the roles you assign RPCs, they will also gain access to new combat abilities. We make one RPC – Maria, who joins after Capone takes over the Meat Packers' speakeasy – the Underboss of the organisation. This gives her the bodyguard trait, meaning, as long as she's with Capone, she'll always be able to act in the first turn of combat.

The simulation governs what other bosses in the city will be doing, but also the actions of city factions such as the FBI. Federal agents will be working to uncover your illicit activities, just as rival factions will plot to undermine your operation. Your rivals may even try to work this to their advantage – having your grunts targeted by police who will attempt to flip them against you. Cops can even show up mid-combat, thanks to the world turn that triggers in each phase, pushing forward the simulation while you battle.

As you play, your empire will grow to include speakeasies, breweries, brothels, unions and protection rackets, and, as well as fighting with other factions, you can ally with them too. Romero Games is promising full mod support and DLC add-ons, too. I went into *Empire of Sin* assuming it would be a lightweight turn-based battler. I leave hopeful that it'll be a full-fledged strategy game, with plenty of dynamic surprises hiding beneath its deep simulation of 1920s Chicago's seediest movers and shakers.

*Phil Savage*

## CAPONE FINISHES THE OTHER OFF WITH A BRUTAL, EXECUTION-STYLE KILL

Walking the streets can be risky.



## Shenmue 3



It's weird how this looks like a new game and an old one at the same time.

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
November

**DEVELOPER**  
Ys Net

**PUBLISHER**  
Deep Silver

**LINK**  
[www.ysnet-inc.jp](http://www.ysnet-inc.jp)

## SHENMUE III

It feels like a Dreamcast game, and that's not really a bad thing

**T**he E3 hands-on demo for *Shenmue III* is timed to 15 minutes, and I'm sat playing with creator Yu Suzuki. Ryo Hazuki, the returning protagonist, is going around a village asking people the same thing again and again. Every time he asks and with the countdown in mind, I want to skip the dialogue, but it seems rude to do that in front of the developer, so I don't.

And so, Ryo asks NPCs the same ridiculous thing over and over again. Most of the answers are wasting my time, and the English voice-acting that delivers them is odd in a way I can't quite put my finger on. This is definitely a *Shenmue* game.

*Shenmue III* feels like a Dreamcast game, only released 20 years later, which I think you can get a sense of from its E3 trailer. The way it presents dialogue options is familiar from previous games, and even your character's health during fights is depicted with similar coloured dots in the corner of the screen. Exploring and talking to people feels like *Shenmue*, and fighting definitely does, even without being built on *Virtua Fighter's* combat system.

I won't pretend there's a ton more I learned from the demo – 15 minutes is slight, considering how much time you can easily waste with the languid pace of a *Shenmue* game. But it's endearingly similar to previous entries – and it doesn't feel overly polished in presentation, even if the characters and environments clearly look a ton better than the originals. "I had to change the game to modernise it a little

PLAYED IT

bit, and also at the same time, I want to make sure that the same feeling and the nostalgic feeling of the original games [stay] in it," says Suzuki via a translator.

"I will tell you that the difficulty of the game is higher than the previous one." I get that sense at the end of the demo, when Ryo's ass is kicked in a one-on-one fight with a more powerful enemy. Progression systems sound like they'll play more of a part in *Shenmue III*.

"One difference is that in the previous game, we used the fighting engine from *Virtua Fighter*, but now we made it from scratch," Suzuki says. "So it's a different system. This is a new combat engine that is made for this RPG style of game, so it's tuned for this kind of game. For this system, we have more training systems, and the way you progress, the skill going up, it's going to be more of a step-by-step growing experience."

There are two major areas in the game, with the second being much larger than the developers had originally planned for, so there'll hopefully be plenty to explore. "You can do some temporary jobs like wood chopping, and you can fish and you can sell those for cash to the store and you can earn money," Suzuki says. It wouldn't be *Shenmue* without part-time jobs.

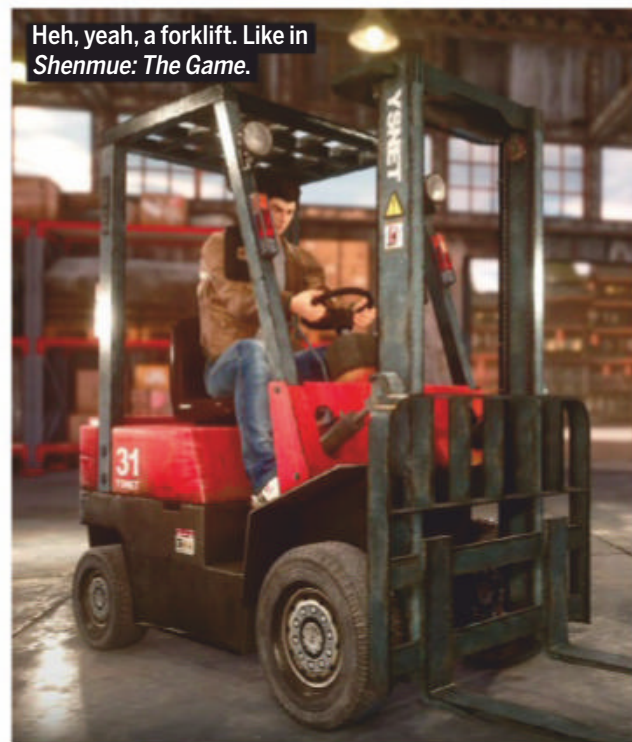
## PREORDER REFUNDS

On PC at least, *Shenmue III* itself has been overshadowed as the game became mired in an easy-to-predict mess with its Epic Games Store exclusivity. Developer Ys Net has explained it'll offer refunds, or a switch to another version – but it would've been easier if it'd followed *Metro's* route of having a limited window of preorders on Steam before moving across, so backers could've got Steam keys at launch.

I really hope Ryo finally gets his revenge on Lan Di in this game, but Suzuki threatens that his story is only 40 per cent over as of *Shenmue 3*. If this ends with Lan Di getting on another helicopter and flying away, followed by a long wait for another game, I'll flip a table over. My first impression, though, is that fans of the original two games will enjoy what's here. Everyone else will almost certainly be baffled by what the fuss is about – and I think that's fine too.

*Samuel Roberts*

Heh, yeah, a forklift. Like in *Shenmue: The Game*.

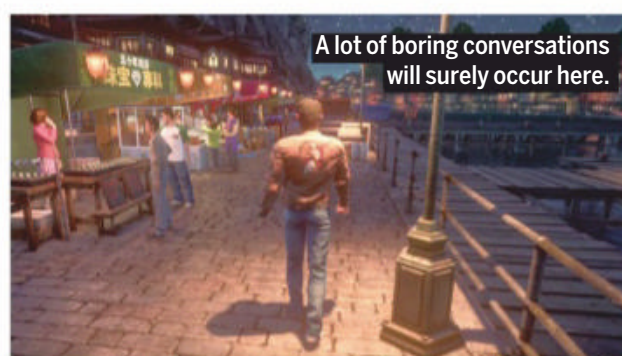


**"THIS IS A NEW COMBAT ENGINE THAT IS MADE FOR THIS RPG STYLE OF GAME"**





Hi-Tech Land Panda is my favourite Digimon.



A lot of boring conversations will surely occur here.





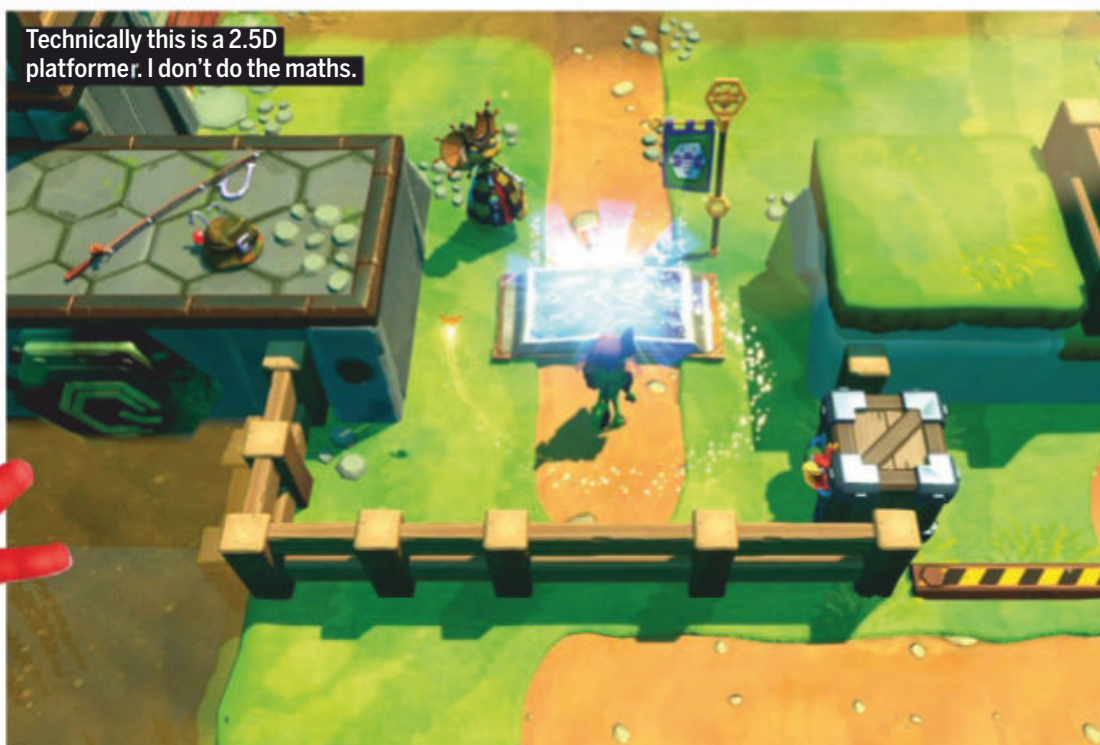
## PREVIEW

### *Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair*

Those bright 3D character designs translate well in a side-scrolling world.

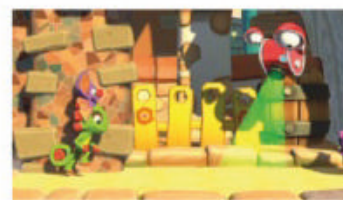
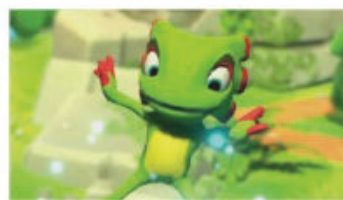


Technically this is a 2.5D platformer. I don't do the maths.





## Yooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair



## NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE  
2019DEVELOPER  
Playtonic GamesPUBLISHER  
Team17LINK  
[www.playtonicgames.com](http://www.playtonicgames.com)YOOKA-LAYLEE  
AND THE  
IMPOSSIBLE LAIRHoney helps the platforming  
masochism go down

**Y**ooka-Laylee and the Impossible Lair is a *Donkey Kong Country* game. It's inarguable. The lizard is wearing the great ape's skin. It's a side-scroller, you roll across the ground to defeat enemies and pick up momentum, collectibles are squirreled away in every level, and there are far too many bees.

But I'm not mad, because *Donkey Kong Country* is a very particular and pleasant kind of platformer. After a short hands-on session at E3, I can verify that Yooka controls like a large ape, with weightier movements that reward chaining leaps and rolls together. Expect to find level design gimmicks that layer complexity as you move through a given branch of stages. There aren't many direct homages like it on PC, and this isn't just pale imitation. Playtonic Games is stepping things up a bit.

The centrepiece is the lair of the title. I won't get into the fat codices of Yooka-Lore, but the bad bee is back, baby, and he's built a den that is purportedly impossible to infiltrate. In practice, that means one long, extremely challenging level that throws every obstacle and enemy at the player at once. And you can attempt this terrible gauntlet of death traps whenever the hell you want.

It's open from the start, so expect platforming masochists to try it and, eventually, succeed without touching another level. The rest of us will need

some honey. Finishing levels in the overworld grants you kind bees who will help you out in the Impossible Lair. By default you'll just have one life to attempt the whole deal, but every bee you save gives you another.

It's a fascinating structural change to the usual linear level arrangement of platformers. Giving you a big, tangible challenge to overcome from the start is a great way to maintain urgency and keep testing your acuity. Assuming, of course, the lair is well-designed.

Even if you want to make the Impossible Lair possible right away, there's good reason to explore the remainder of Yooka-Kong. The level map looks like your typical top-down select screen, but functions as its own light-touch adventure exploration game.

It's a genuine overworld, dotted with hidden areas, enemies, and puzzles. Characters give out little quests and most of your interactions here feed back into the levels. For instance, finding a hidden pathway early on lets you undam a river, which then floods a level you might have already completed. If you head back, you'll have the option to play a more difficult, flooded version. And guess what, more levels to finish means more bees to buoy your Impossible Lair runs. Even poking around up top helps out with your greater goal.

PLAYED  
IT

## KING OF KONGS

As enamoured as I am by the structural changes, I'm still not sold on the world and characters of Yooka-Laylee. It's like the writers have strapped a book of puns to a gurney in their basement, extracting sickly wordplay from its withering form. The jokes are fun – we're in the pun business too – but leave little room for interesting characterisation. I'd like to see the same experimentation in structure matched in the art and writing.

Playtonic has nailed the basics. But the way enemies and obstacles grow in complexity and creativity over the course of several levels is where *Donkey Kong Country* shines, and I didn't get to see Yooka-Laylee's own iterative process in action. We'll just need to play it later this year to find out if the experiment succeeds.

James Davenport

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needs bottomless pits.



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**DOOM ETERNAL**, A SEQUEL TO 2016'S STELLAR REBOOT, IS A GAME OF IMPOSSIBLE SCALE AND DRAMA. SO MUCH SO THAT THE PREVIOUS GAME SEEMS ALMOST BORING IN COMPARISON.

*By Andy Kelly*



# BLOODY

# HELL



## COVER FEATURE

### Doom Eternal

**“F**rom the beginning our goal was making you fight in unbelievable locations, surprising you every step of the way,” says id Software’s Marty Stratton, producer of *Doom Eternal*. “From the very start to the final boss, players will be seeing things they’d never expect from a *Doom* game.” “It’s all about engagement,” says creative director Hugo Martin, a word the two developers use several times in our interview. “Not only do these moments achieve that from a visual perspective,” he adds, “but the mechanics contribute to it too.”

The Doom Slayer can now climb, grabbing hold of surfaces with a certain texture, which opens up the level design massively. He can dash in mid-air as well, crossing wide gaps and leaping up to climbable surfaces. “These new abilities are interwoven with our visual set-pieces, so it’s not

just for show,” says Martin. “You have to think your way through the level design in *Doom Eternal*.”

I get a taste of this when, to make my way across this mess of floating space-rocks, I have to air-dash between them, grabbing hold of them at the last minute, otherwise I’ll fall into the void below.

Like the series’ gunplay, these new movement controls feel slick and responsive. But occasionally I have to remind myself that I’m playing a *Doom* game. I ask the developers how, with all this wild new stuff going on, they’re staying true to the distinctive feel of the series.

“As long as the solution to every problem involves the player being aggressive somehow, it feels like *Doom*,” says Martin. “Every action the player takes is an aggressive one, whether it’s jamming your hands into a rock face and climbing like a bear, breaking chains apart, or smashing through a wall. All of this feeds into the idea of being the Doom Slayer, reinforcing his role in the world.”

Another thing I notice in my demo is how the flow of the level feels much more organic than anything in the 2016 game. “As fun as the last *Doom* was, there was a monotony to it,” admits Marty Stratton. “In the later levels especially it felt like corridor, arena, corridor, arena. There’s a grandeur to the combat arenas, or combat stadiums as Hugo likes to call them, in *Doom*

**BELOW:** Who do you kill first? This is a life or death decision in *Doom Eternal*.



*Eternal*. But the in-between spaces, the glue of the level, aren’t just about getting you from one place to the next. We want you to engage with these more this time.

“There’s a lot of exploration and secrets, which are of course a big part of any *Doom* game. We want players to use their minds. There are some fun, simple, but engaging puzzles in there too. Puzzles with a small P. Combat puzzles, really. We really want the moments between the fighting to be interesting.”

I admit that I found the previous *Doom* a little repetitive, but playing



## HISTORY OF VIOLENCE *The Doom story so far*



### DOOM 1993

The original *Doom* is the gory journey through Hell that set the standard for first-person shooters on PC.



### DOOM II 1994

Interconnected levels and a greater variety of enemies elevated *Doom* to new heights in this legendary sequel.



### FINAL DOOM 1996

A compilation of two *Doom II* mods, *TNT: Evilution* and *The Plutonia Experiment*. More of a spin-off than a sequel.



### DOOM 3 2004

A reboot with an increased focus on horror and storytelling, which remains the most divisive entry in the series.



### DOOM 2016

Another reboot, and arguably a more successful one. This brought *Doom* back to its violent, fast-paced roots.



### DOOM ETERNAL 2019

Very much the *Doom II* to the original *Doom*, *Eternal* takes the 2016 reboot and revs it up like a bloody chainsaw.





**“IF YOU NEED ARMOUR, YOU CAN  
USE THE FLAME BELCH”**



**ABOVE:** Each enemy type fights uniquely, which makes battles like this about tactics.

**LEFT:** It's big, brash and epic, but there are brains under that green helmet too.

*Eternal*, I'm struck by how varied it is. Between the different guns, each with their own alternate fire modes, a new crop of demons, all of whom behave differently, and a range of new abilities, there's tons to think about in every firefight. If you need health, perform a glory kill on an injured enemy – a brutal, gory instant takedown. Need armour? Roast an enemy with your new shoulder-mounted flamethrower and they'll

spit it out. It's some of the most exciting, dynamic first-person combat I've ever played.

“You were empowered to make those decisions,” says Marty Stratton. “If you're low on health you know you have a tool to get some. There aren't 15 ways to get health. You can find it in the world as usual, but really it's about glory killing enemies.

“Or if you need armour, you can use the flame belch. We're not hiding this stuff. You aren't at the whim of a level designer, it's in your hands.”

“We want to keep you thinking. That's the key ingredient to engagement,” says Hugo Martin, using that word again. “A game that gives you something to master is a game that's worth playing.”

One battle in particular, towards the end of the demo, felt like spinning plates. I had to constantly think about which enemies to deal with first, never stopping for a breath, using jump pads and cover to my advantage. It was relentless and exhilarating, and difficult too. But the satisfaction of getting slightly better with each botched attempt, and eventually beating it, was immense.





**“IT’S SO SATISFYING TO  
HEAR THE METALLIC PLINK  
SOUND OF THEM  
BEING DESTROYED”**

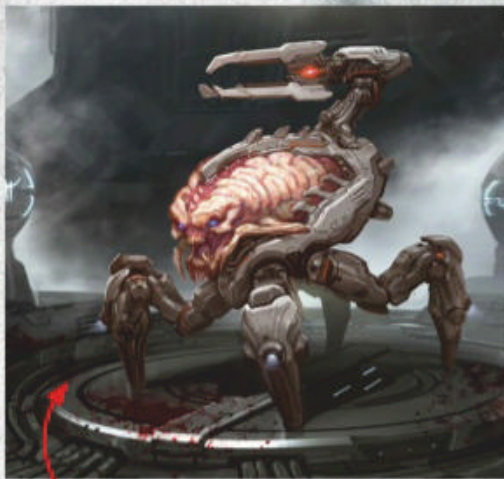
## » DEADLY ENEMIES

The new demons, some of whom return from *Doom II*, are a big part of what makes the combat so interesting. I ask the two developers which of the new bestiary they enjoy fighting the most. “I like the Carcass a lot,” says Martin, referring to a three-legged demon that can throw up energy shields. “It can block you from glory killing and protects other AI. There’s a lot going on in *Doom Eternal*. It’s very tightly balanced. The rocket launcher is more powerful, but the rockets move more slowly, they do more self damage, and there’s less ammo.

“So a missed rocket hurts more, and it can blow up in your face, which makes the Carcass’s shields so tricky. When you face them you really have to think about using that rocket launcher.”

“I like the Mancubus,” says Stratton. “He’s not new, but he’s been updated. He and a lot of the other heavies have these weak spots. For example, you can shoot the Mancubus’ guns off its arms. It’s so satisfying to hear the metallic plink sound of them being destroyed. You can really weaken enemies this way, and you’ll have to because they’re

## ART ATTACK *Concept art from Doom Eternal*



Concept art for *Eternal*’s version of the Arachnotron, a returning enemy from *Doom II*. You can shoot its head-gun off.



Described by id as the ‘arch-nemesis’ of the Doom Slayer, this multi-weapon beast is named the Doomhunter.



Concept art of another returning enemy, the brilliantly named Pain Elemental. Like a meaner, smellier Cacodemon.

An evocative painting of a classic *Doom* environment, which depicts a soul processing plant in Hell.



A test model of the Ballista, a devastating new weapon that launches fast-moving projectiles. Similar to *Quake*’s railgun.





much more lethal now. The Mancubus is so devastating if you don't manage him and shoot those guns off, and they're so much fun to fight. The destructible demon stuff is really fun to watch actually.

"You can really chew through enemies with the chain gun or blow them apart with the rocket launcher. I've fought all of these enemies so many times at this point and it's still so fun. These little details can be rewarding over and over again."

"The Arachnotron is tuned really aggressively to steer you towards attacking their weak points, and if you don't you're gonna have a really hard time," says Martin of a new mechanical spider enemy that *Doom II* fans will be familiar with. "That's what makes fighting them so engaging. And it's the same with the Carcass and its shield. This is a character who can block glory kills, one of your main ways of getting health. This makes you prioritise that enemy, and in turn we've tuned him so he kinda hangs back, which forces you to move a lot. There's a lot happening in *Doom Eternal*."

*Doom* is marketed as this big, dumb, extreme shooter, but after playing *Eternal* I'm impressed by

how deep the combat is, and how many layers there are to peel back. "*Doom* is fun, it's a power fantasy, it's rock and roll, all of those things," says Martin. "But we wanna make a smart game too, where every decision has meaning, with scope for mastery. As you play you'll learn and get better. Every time you die we want you to feel like you've learned something. You know the game didn't screw you, it was you who messed up, and you wanna get back in and take another shot at it. That's a really hard thing to get right, but I feel like we've hit the sweet spot in *Eternal*."

There are double the number of demons in *Eternal*, but Stratton is keen to stress that this isn't just because it looks cool in a features list – it's an attempt to make the game more, yes, engaging.

"We're challenging players all the way through the game, with the scope of the levels, the level design," he says. "We're constantly throwing new enemies at you all the way into the late stages. Honestly, you'd hit a plateau in the 2016 game. You'd get to an arena, see the same targets, and handle them easily. But that won't happen here. You need to restructure your priority list several times during a fight and also decide which weapons and mods to use. Overall, whether it's the demons or the level design, we never want you to hit that brick wall."

### RIP AND TEAR

One of the quirks of the previous game is that, despite being an all-out action game, it also had a surprising amount of story to snack on. *Eternal* will be the same, but players who want to flesh things out will have to actively decide to do so. "The story is all about increasing your level of engagement and adding a bit of context to the experience," says Stratton. "Through the plot,

environmental storytelling, world building, we want to give everything you do meaning.

"But we want to keep it lean and mean. We tend to focus on the A-story, which is where you're going and what you're doing. The general high level idea of why you're doing this stuff has to be clear to you, and that's on the main path."

More importantly for id Software, in terms of story, the Doom Slayer has to feel like the Doom Slayer. "The trick is making it feel like the

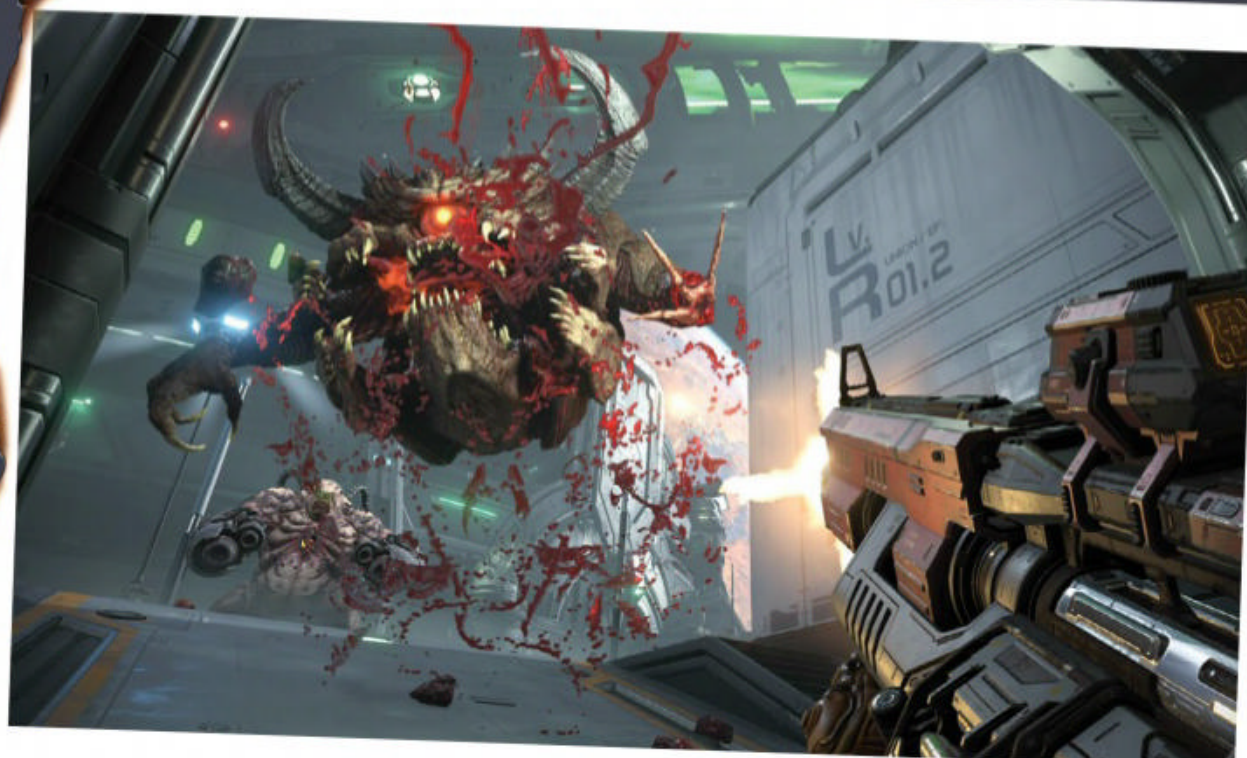
character in the story behaves the same way as the character you're playing as," says Stratton. "When you play *Eternal* you're a vicious killing machine that everyone is terrified of, and in the story that's exactly who you are as well."

As for the tech powering *Doom Eternal*, this is the first game to use the newest version of id's in-house engine, id Tech 7. "The rendering engine hasn't been rebuilt, but refactored quite a bit to allow for many, many, many more polygons on the screen," says Stratton. "That's one of the biggest improvements, because it allows us to make even bigger worlds. Levels are two or three times the scope of anything in the 2016 game, which is a direct result of using id Tech 7. It also makes the game more destructible. Whether that's the enemies or the levels. You'll see moments and set-pieces of destruction on a massive, epic scale, which feeds back into the aggression of *Doom*. This is a whole new tech system we developed. We're very confident calling this id Tech 7 over the last game, which used id Tech 6. It's an evolution in every way."

The previous *Doom* is one of the best reboots of all time, but it didn't quite offer enough variety. So that's why I'm excited about *Doom Eternal*, because it's the same kind of vicious, fast, thrilling combat, but with a lot more going on under the hood. By making the Doom Slayer more mobile, greatly expanding his arsenal, and giving him double the number of demons to massacre, *Eternal* is shaping up to be one of the best entries in the *Doom* series to date. If they can keep the quality of my demo up for the length of the whole game, you're in for a hell of a treat. ■

**TOP LEFT:** Weapons have an alternate fire mode, doubling your means of destruction.

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** Demons are all destructible, meaning you can tear them to shreds.





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# LIFE

Six stories of how  
**THE SIMS** changed PC  
gaming for everyone





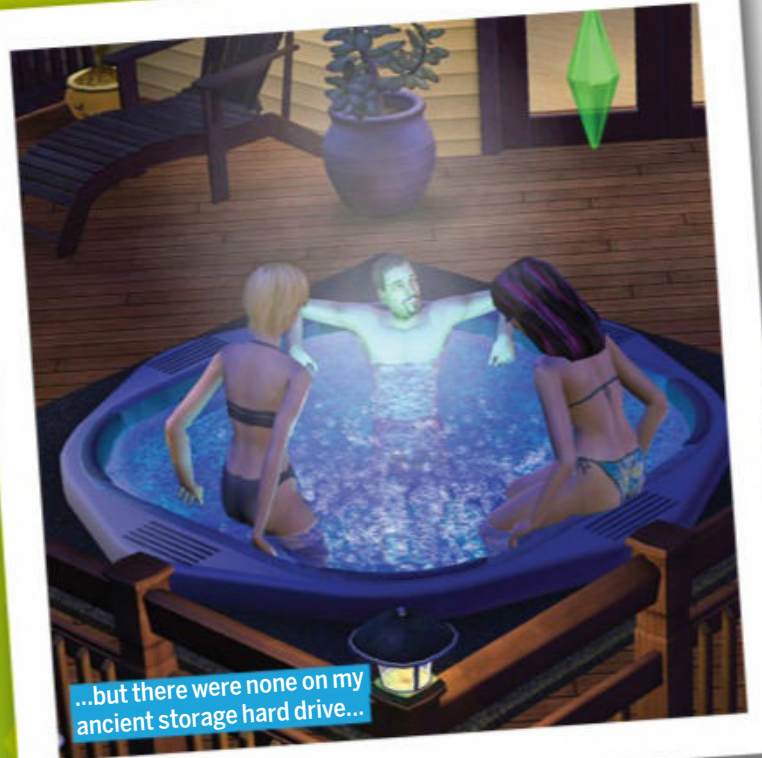
# EXTENDED FAMILY

*The Sims 2* as an extension of an already-embarrassing teen existence

By Keza MacDonald

**T**here are two types of *Sims* players: the ones who create maniacal fantasies, in which hapless, interchangeable *Sims* are mere pawns in their sadistic games involving swimming pools and deleted ladders, and those who painstakingly recreate people and situations from real life and then run bizarre social experiments with them. As a teen playing *The Sims 2*, I was the latter.

I'd discovered *The Sims* on a friend's mum's PC a few years previously, whilst staying up late into the night on a sleepover, prodding little computer people who couldn't ever seem to figure out how to use a dishwasher without help. But those early *Sims* were pixelly automatons. *The Sims 2* had the character creator of my dreams. Instead of prefab faces with Lego haircuts, it had nose-length sliders and colour wheels and personality traits. My first few afternoons with the game were



entirely spent within the Create-A-Sim menus, painstakingly recreating pretty much everyone I knew with unerring accuracy. (I still have a bit of a talent with character creators. Give me 20 minutes and I'll do you one kickass Mii.)

Naturally, the next thing I did was take my tiny digital versions of family, friends, my then-boyfriend and his parents, and make them all live together in a massive house that I built with infinite-money cheats, to see what would happen. (Actually that's not true. The first thing I did was create a virtual David Boreanaz and Sarah Michelle Gellar and force them into a one-bedroom flat in the hopes of creating my own interactive Buffy the Vampire Slayer fan-fiction, but if I talk any more about that I will die of embarrassment.)

## GENERATION GAME

So, there I was, in the utility cupboard that for some reason housed our family PC (why were PCs always kept in cupboards in the '90s/early '00s?), watching a tiny on-screen version of my boyfriend's dad pretend to paddle a bathtub like a canoe as the *Sims*-clone of my brother looked on in bemusement.

At this moment my actual, flesh-and-blood dad walked in, presumably to turn the central heating down, as all Scottish dads are constantly doing. I turned around to see him staring at the little virtual versions of himself and all his loved ones, their smiling headshots and happiness meters lining the edges of the screen, an expression of horror spreading across his face.

"What... what are you doing?!" he asked. I had no answer. I just sort of

I tried hard to find screenshots from my teen *Sims 2* experiments...







sat there with my mouth open until he backed out of the room.

My poor, freaked-out dad. This must have been like his own personal episode of Black Mirror.

What could I have said? “Don’t worry, Dad, I’m only creating virtual robot-versions of you without consent and messing with them to see what will happen.”

It was never mentioned again, but he couldn’t quite look me in the eye for several days afterwards. He was right to be disturbed, thinking about

it. There is something deeply megalomaniacal about *The Sims*. It feeds every human’s innate god complex, enables extreme control-freakery, and lets you manipulate tiny people for entertainment.

## THERE IS SOMETHING DEEPLY MEGALOMANIACAL ABOUT THE SIMS

This is one of the reasons for its extreme popularity, but another is that it’s also a powerful engine for wish-fulfilment.

The difference between *The Sims* and other videogames is that the fantasies it offers are almost charmingly mundane: get your dream

job, find someone to love, make a bit of money, own a nice house, start a family. The irony is that for the generation that were teens during peak *Sims* mania, half of these very ordinary aspirations now feel borderline unachievable in real life.

### TEENAGE KICKS

As an adolescent I spent a lot of time thinking about what my future might look like. Over the two years I spent playing *The Sims 2* on and off, as well as building a lot of houses, downloading a couple of nudity mods and throwing a lot of awkward parties where *Sims*-versions of my friends unexpectedly got off with each other, I tried out different looks, careers and romances, friendships and personality traits.

Teens are so famously self-obsessed because those years are when you’re forming your identity. As well as offering a distraction from real life, *The Sims* lets you think about real life, if you want to. Within the confines of its little consumerist micro-world, it lets you try on different futures (or presents).

Under my careful guidance, my first *Sims*-me became a rich mad scientist in a castle-like house with six redheaded children. She died happy after an unnaturally long life prolonged by a Fountain of Youth in her untidy garden. Sadly I can’t exactly say I’m on the same path in real life. For one thing, so far my children are blonde. ♦







# OOH BE GAH

How to speak like the Sims

By Alysia Judge

**T**he last time you stubbed your toe, hopped on one foot, and cursed in a series of wordless noises – “mmmmnaaargh ow umph!” – you were speaking Simlish. The exact collection of strangled vowels that echoed down your hallway probably haven’t yet been heard in a *Sims* game, but their emotional delivery is the core tenant of speaking *The Sims*’ iconic language fluently. Here, anguish communicated more than “I banged my foot” ever could. Feeling is more important than phonology in Simlish.

Emotion is the answer to a problem that had developers scratching their heads in 1996. Sims needed to communicate realistically – it’s a life simulator after all – but using English would become repetitive and literally put words into the mouths of characters whose story belonged to the player.

“We went with Simlish to solve the creative problem of the user created story,” says Robi Kauker, audio director for *The Sims*. “Simlish gives an emotional context to what is happening in game without interjecting specific meaning. So when two Sims have a conversation, it is up to the player to decide if it is about the weather, or an affair between neighbours, or anything else.”

## IN SOME GAMES LIKE THE SIMS, PLAYERS TAKE AN ACTIVE ROLE IN WORLD BUILDING

Game of Thrones, Lord of the Rings, and other fantasy dramas invented fictional languages that are spoken in real life as fluently as French. The grammatical richness of Elvish and Dothraki make Middle Earth and Essos seem more real, but it’s rare to find the same level of linguistic minutiae in videogames.

For Kauker, that’s partly because in some games like *The Sims*, players take an active role in world building, which requires a more laissez-faire approach from developers.

“[TV, film and books] all have a properly defined story,” he says. “It

would be wrong for the creators not to define the language ... in *The Sims*, the game gives that creative role to the player. The player develops the stories and truths about their world with the game.”

So if you want to speak Simlish fluently, you’ll have to be imaginative. Kauker and the team have invented under 200 words that loosely mean something, but they’re never used in exactly the same scenarios.

For example, ‘nooboo’ means ‘baby’, but the word could be heard while a Sim holds a child, tells an age, notes another Sim’s behaviour, or points to a crib. So nooboo isn’t so much the word for baby, but the sound attached to the practical, cultural, and social realities of youth. This leaves room to improvise around words, and invent new sounds that fit a given situation.

The best example of real-world Simlish speakers are found in the singers who translate their songs to be used in-game. Paramore, Jason Derulo, and My Chemical Romance have all recorded full tracks using the developers’ linguistic guidelines but with the freedom to mould the language as they see fit.

So, for example, Katy Perry’s lyric “Cause you’re hot then you’re cold” became “ka vahap ni nap col”, while “you’re yes then you’re no” translates to “fa hit tinap blow”.







Probably best we don't translate this one.

“Occasionally we get some unbelievable performances,” says Kauker. “It’s almost like not having the words causes the singer to put more energy into the vocal emotion to get the message across – at least that is my theory.”

### SMOOSHIBE SUL SUL

Simlish is now 23 years old and still evolving. In 1996 every Sim’s expression was obvious to the point of slapstick, but with each sequel and expansion pack comes more nuance and complexity. Each successive voice actor has been given the freedom to express their own take on the situations they’re bringing to life, meaning Simlish now has a large toolkit of emotional expressions that are mostly individual to the voices behind them.

Kauker, for his part, has a few favourite expressions, “Having just finished *The Sims 4: Island Living* and with summertime here, it’s got to be ‘Smooshibe’, which kinda translates to all things sunshine related. And there is always ‘Sul Sul’ which is kind of a greeting sort of in the style of aloha.”

Traditional linguists might find Simlish’s paucity of grammar frustrating, but Kauker’s team mirrors a modern approach to language that abandons the rulebook. Today’s millennial culture has broken



## KEY WORDS *Your essential Simlish phrases*



“Om za gleb!”  
– Oh my gosh!



“Vens unch?”  
– When’s lunch?



“Ongie”  
– Selfie



“Yibs / Yibbsy”  
– Yes



“Arogoba”  
– Good bye



“Yib-Sim”  
– Best friend

down and reshaped English to be as expressive in written form as it is in spoken. Body language, tone, and volume of voice is now conveyed online with atypical use of capitalisation, spelling, and acronyms. For instance, a total absence of punctuation is used on social media to express unfettered excitement, and to mimic the way someone speaks

when they are too agitated to take a breath in conversation.

This contemporary focus on reshaping written language to mirror emotion is identical to *The Sims’* approach. “Simlish is just a commitment to communication via emotional expression,” says Kauker. “If you can be honest with that then making the ‘words’ is fun and easy.” ♦





# TAKE PRIDE

How *The Sims* has spearheaded queer representation in gaming.

By Natalie Flores

**W**hen I first played *The Sims* as a little girl, I found it odd that I could have relationships with men and women. It would be many years before I realised that this isn't just normal – it's also my normal.

Now that I'm older and have come into my own as a bisexual woman, I've realised the profound impact *The Sims* had on me through its depiction of queerness as natural in the face of a society that once largely found it radical. For the last two decades, *The Sims* has spearheaded queer representation in gaming. The freedom it's long offered in letting players romance, woohoo, and marry whomever they wish regardless of gender – to be who they truly want to be without limitations – has been so valuable to my exploration of my identity, as it has been for many others.

## LEARNING

There's little mystique found in *The Sims* – things can and often do get

silly, but its core is grounded in reality. You create and control characters who get jobs, form relationships and raise families.

It's this mundanity that helped a player named Mark find themselves. They initially dismissed their preference of controlling female Sims as doing what they couldn't do in real life – in this case, be a girl – because it was a videogame. "By the time I was mature enough to even attempt to try to figure out my identity, I had

realised that playing as feminine and especially androgynous characters was more appealing," says Mark. They grew to see it more "as an

aspirational goal than ... a novelty" which proved easy "in a game about just ... living, without having to lead a gang or battle aliens".

The realism was also crucial for a player named Lily in coming to terms with being trans. She says the character creator is one of the few "where the clothing options are both realistic – not fantasy armour or military gear – and varied". This has allowed her to spend

hours trying clothes on her Sim, expressing herself in ways she hasn't been able to in real life.

## HEALING

Using *The Sims* as a playground for experimenting has been integral to games journalist Rebekah Valentine's healing process following a break-up. Before it happened (though unrelated to it), she began thinking she might be bisexual. While she's still coming to terms with her bisexuality and doesn't want to date yet, she says it's been immensely helpful to live through her Sim "to explore what my ... 'ideal' life would be like if I didn't have fears and anxieties and worries about everything from money to sexuality to whatever else".

For Mollie Faux-Wilkins, otherwise known as TheEnglishSimmer on YouTube, seeing herself in her Sims let her feel like her queerness was just an ordinary part of her rather than a big discovery. "Before I even suspected that I might not be straight and throughout my childhood, I had a positive space on my computer

## THE IMPACT THE SIMS HAD ON ME THROUGH ITS DEPICTION OF QUEERNESS



## LGBTQ+ A timeline of queer inclusivity in The Sims



**SIMS**  
2000

Same-sex couples can move in together and adopt a child.



**SIMS 2**  
2004

Same-sex couples have a 'Joined Union' identical to marriage bar terminology.



**SIMS 3**  
2009

All couples can marry, regardless of their gender.



**SIMS 4**  
2014

Gender-neutral bathrooms, first game to include LGBTQ+ NPC families and a non-binary Sim.



Parenthood is an ordeal for any couple.



Since *The Sims 3* you can marry anyone, regardless of gender.

where my Sims could have feelings for any gender, and that normalisation felt like it played a major role in my coming out.”

She’s made a point of creating queer content, which matters given her visibility as one of the largest figures in the community. She’s driven by “the viewers who [have] needed to find it and ... desperately wanted to see themselves or their friends in the media, be it a videogame, TV or books”.

While *The Sims* has been wonderfully inclusive with its options – you can pick a Sim’s physical frame, clothing preference, whether they can become pregnant, and whether they can use the toilet

standing – there’s always room for improvement. Faux-Wilkins and her community have already discussed how the series can keep leading the charge on queer representation.

One way is the implementation of a third non-binary option to the Create-A-Sim tool and they/them pronouns in the game’s notification system. Faux-Wilkins adds, “Opening up that conversation made me realise that not all languages in the world have gender neutral pronouns ... That’s why I think starting these conversations are so important.”

Electronic Arts has recently revealed a new partnership with the It Gets Better Project to include LGBTQ+ Pride items in *The Sims 4*. And, with the help of more queer-affirming media like *The Sims*, it truly does get better. ♦





Mulder and Daenerys: the ultimate crossover?



# REMAKING CANON

Making your favourites kiss in *The Sims 2*

By Aimee Hart

**“I**f you don’t like it, why don’t you make something else that you do like?” is one of those questions that many inside fandom spaces have heard, especially when directed towards minorities, and will continue to hear probably until the end of time. It’s a crappy retort that, at its heart, pushes aside real, troubling issues in favour of the artist’s vision.

My favourite character in *The Walking Dead*, Andrea, met a grisly end in the third season finale. So, like

any other reasonable person, I decided I was going to change the ending completely. Not by petitioning a complete rewrite of the season, I’ll leave that to *Game of Thrones* fans, but by making a new one by myself in *The Sims 2*.

As I found out, I wasn’t the only one who handled my love for a certain media turning sour by turning to *The Sims*, specifically *The Sims 2*. There were others like Shannon, who told me they used the game in order to change what had occurred in media that they liked. These weren’t just changes like “I didn’t like the ending of a show”, sometimes, they

were to rewrite aspects that they felt were completely negligent to the media’s minority audience.

One example she gave me was when the show *The 100* killed off one of its major LGBTQ+ characters, Lexa, back in 2016. There was a huge protest at the time, with many fans feeling as though they had been finally given the climax of a loving

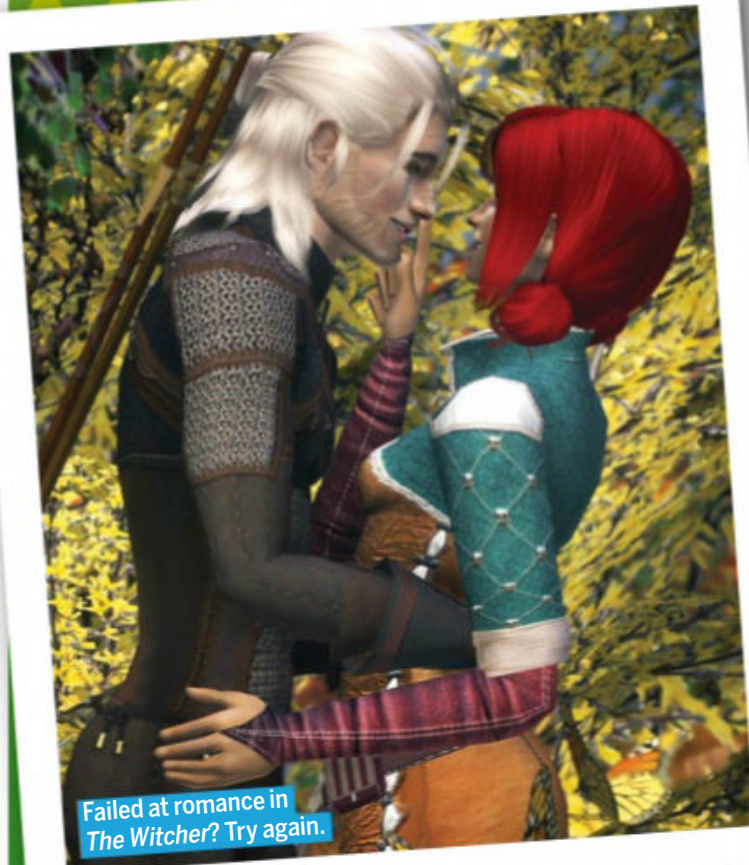


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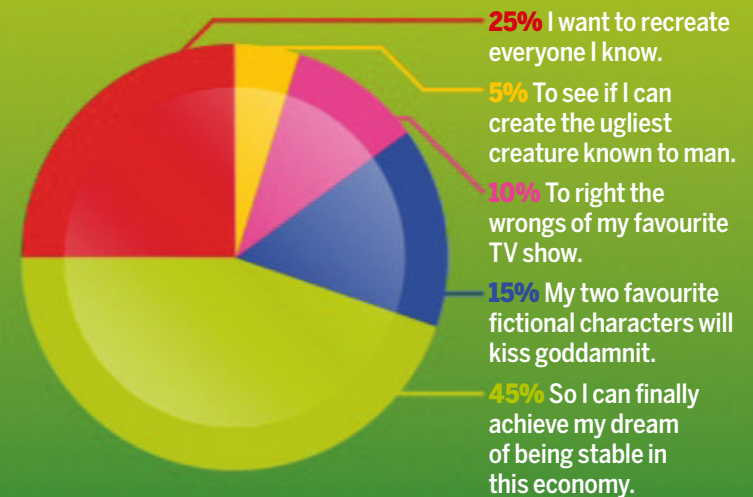




Dana Scully, enjoying some downtime.

## WHY YOU PLAY

### Reasons for *The Sims*' success



relationship between Lexa and the protagonist, Clarke, only to have her brutally killed off by a stray bullet.

### REBOOT

While other fans were doing petitions and asking that LGBTQ+ audiences and characters be taken more seriously,

Shannon chose to act in her own way.

"Lexa and Clarke... I loved them a lot, and I still do," she says. "When [Lexa] died I just knew I had to go back onto *The Sims 2* and make some

changes. I couldn't let the relationship that helped me come out to my friends and family just fizzle out like that. It was just too personal, too raw."

## THEY STARTED AS ROOMMATES, BUT WITH DIFFERENT JOBS

So the first thing Shannon did was download mods of the two characters, throwing them into a world that was very different from their

apocalyptic beginnings. They started as roommates, but with different jobs that kept them separate. Clarke was a burglar that worked nights, while Lexa was an actress.

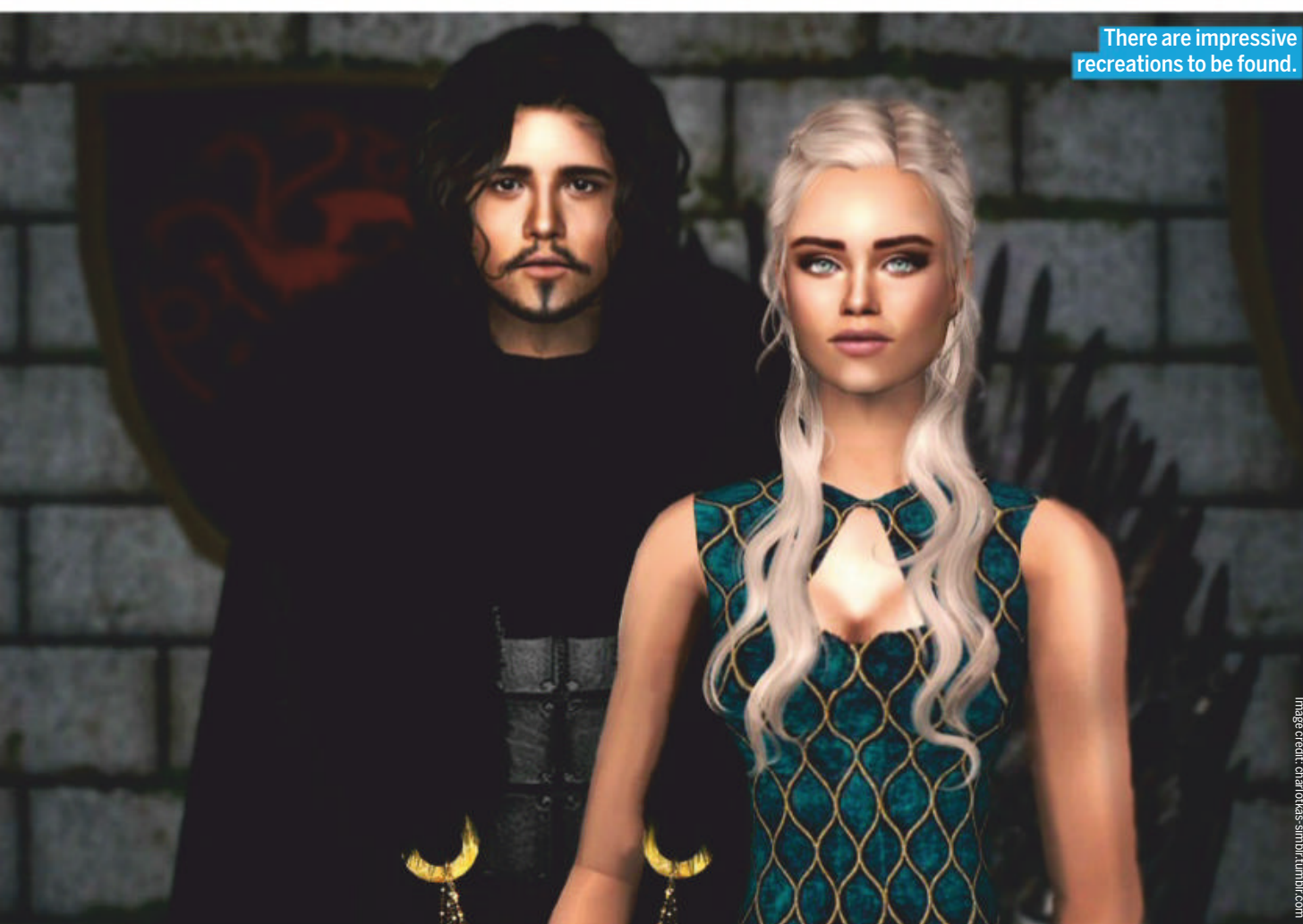
"At first they rarely talked to one another. Their jobs kept them apart, kind of like in the TV show. But over time the slow-burn blossomed into a romance that left them with two kids and a dog and cat. So I'd say it was worth it."

As for why she picked *The Sims 2* despite 3 and 4 being available, Shannon added that, "I'd grown up with the game, and I knew my way around the modding community for that game a lot more than I did with the others. I guess it was also because I was nostalgic and felt that, after so many years of not playing, I could play the game without having to relearn everything."

Another player, Olka, told me that their use of the game was a much more immersive experience about getting to control their favourite characters. It also had something to do with being able to log onto Sims Resources and download mods for what they wanted rather than waste time.

"I always preferred to use characters I enjoyed until, later down the line, I started to include characters that I'd made up myself when I was older." Olka later added that sometimes it was the mundanity of their favourite characters making something as simple as mac and cheese, where canon and plot twists and awful events couldn't touch them, that made playing so satisfying.

*The Sims* can easily be considered utopian, but the reasons why have always varied. For Shannon and Olka, *The Sims* can help "right the wrongs" of their favourite media, channelling their emotions into a world they can change for the better. It may not change what happened in canon, but it can allow fans to take control in cathartic ways. Game of Thrones fans? Take note. ♦



There are impressive recreations to be found.

Image credit: charlotkas-simblr.tumblr.com



This is the danger we face every day.



In The Sims 3, your sims loved a good tumble.



Relatable AF.



## LAUNDRY MACHINES

The Sims 3 vs The Sims 4

| THE SIMS 3              | THE SIMS 4            |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| Non-stackable           | Stackable             |
| Four machines           | One machine           |
| No old-timey washtub    | Old-timey washtub     |
| Three hampers           | Three hampers         |
| Clothesline             | Clothesline           |
| No dryer lint           | Dryer lint            |
| Can't set dryer on fire | Can set dryer on fire |







# LAUNDRY LOVE

Laundry was the best and worst thing to happen to *The Sims*.

By Joanna Nelius

**O**ne of the most charming aspects about *The Sims* is that it sometimes falls just short of reality. Take having kids in the first game. Instead of showing the mother's pregnancy, a cloud of daisies will flutter around in the air and 'give birth' to a baby in a bassinet. But *The Sims* is much more accurate to real life now in many ways other than having children. You can go to college, run your own restaurant, and do laundry – which is equally the worst and best thing to happen to *The Sims*.

The ability to wash and dry your Sims' clothing first appeared with *The Sims 3*'s *Ambitions* expansion pack. It included a few different washing machines, dryers, and the option to dry clothing on a clothesline, which gives bonuses to eco-friendly Sims for saving energy. Laundry was so popular after its introduction in *The Sims 3* that many fans complained for years about its absence in *The Sims 4* before it was eventually added through its own Stuff Pack. The most endearing quality of laundry is that it makes a household feel more complete – and by complete, I mean you feel your Sims' hatred for laundry as much as your own. Especially in *Sims 4*. (*Sims 3* Sims will jump at the chance to do laundry. The weirdos.)

Dirty clothes automatically get thrown into a nearby hamper when your Sim gets changed, but you need

to get your Sims to move those dirty clothes to the washing machine. If any Sims in your household have the 'neat' trait, they might do it on their own if the hamper is overflowing, or the maid will do it for them if your Sims family is rich enough to afford a daily cleaning service – but not even the hired help wants to do laundry.

## SIMS 3 SIMS WILL JUMP AT THE CHANCE TO DO LAUNDRY. THE WEIRDOS

In both *The Sims 3* and *The Sims 4*, the maid will often wait until the laundry baskets are full before they even attempt to do the most hated chore on the planet.

If they somehow muster up enough motivation, they'll gather the clothes out of one basket, put them in the washer, and then end their work shift, leaving the family to deal with the rest while still collecting their full fee for the day.

Laundry also introduced brand new ways to make your Sims miserable – and kill them. Cheap washing machines break and soak your Sim in dirty water, leaving them in a salty mood for hours. Dryers break too, forcing your Sims to use their non-existent handiness skills and risk electrocution. *The Sims 4* added an extra step to doing laundry – cleaning out the dryer's lint. If you let it build up, it's guaranteed your Sim will start a house fire and possibly die in the process – but if you're the kind of person who likes to kill your Sims on purpose, this is an easier method than waiting for one of them to set the kitchen on fire.

### SIMPLE MINDED

While those quirks of doing laundry are still charming, the mechanics of it defy logic. *The Sims 4* requires the player to physically click on each laundry basket in turn if they want their Sim to collect all of the laundry for a single load.

*Sims 3* Sims do collect the dirty laundry from all the baskets on their own, but they create more work for themselves by collecting it in the most inefficient way possible. They'll get laundry from one hamper on the second floor, then walk downstairs to the hamper in the second bathroom, then walk back upstairs to the kids' room, then walk downstairs to the laundry room and throw everything in the wash while forgetting about yet another hamper full of stinky clothes hidden in some other room. Or sometimes they'll say 'screw it' and just drop the laundry right in front of the washer and then go into the other room to play videogames.

Doing laundry in *The Sims* is entirely optional, of course. But you'll miss out on the worst-best qualities it adds to the game – and all that adorable laundry room decor. ♦







Work might not be scintillating, but it is satisfying.

# LICENCE TO BILL

Stuff, not stories, forms the real heart of *The Sims* series

By Emma Davies

the endless cycle of capitalism. What do we want? The biggest, nicest house in the neighbourhood! When do we want it? As soon as we've chip-chip-chipped away at our career paths to cobble together the requisite savings, even if it's a project that consumes multiple generations!

And, lest we forget, this is a franchise that's always been all about the add-ons. Ever since the original *Livin' Large* content pack, EA has pumped out expansions like there's no tomorrow – there's nothing like the prospect of more items to spend on in-game to keep fans splashing that real-life cash.

We all think back fondly to that heart-shaped bed from the *Hot Date* pack... er, right?

I've watched enough episodes of *Eastenders* to know how I should want life among my *Sims* families to go down. Sarah ought to be boffing Kenneth from across the street behind her husband Jim-Bob's back. Their grade-school daughter Katie should be bullying every nerd in the playground, while her teenage brother Miles acts as a secret criminal mastermind plotting the downfall of poor, hapless Kenneth's unsuspecting

family. Every dinner-table conversation should be fraught with tension and the possibility that, at any moment, a plate of food could end up flying at the wall.

It's up to me to bring these webs of intrigue to life. But, let's be honest, that's not how I *really* play *The Sims*.

You don't even need to scratch the surface of the franchise to realise what these games are about – possessions, and the relentless accumulation thereof. These are simulations of nothing so much as







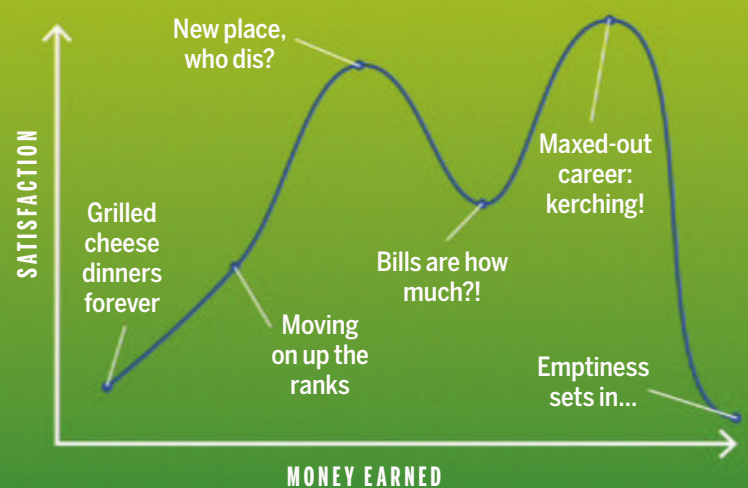
The internet is a goldmine of players eagerly showing off their latest builds, fully furnished with every mod con you can imagine – and some you’ve not even dreamed of. From dollhouses to McMansions, they’re proudly displayed in galleries more meticulously curated than an influencer’s Instagram grid. Whether forged from the hands of a virtual god in build mode or funded through the get-rich-quick scheme of cheat codes, they’ve certainly spared no expense.

## SHE JUST FELT A BIT SAD THAT THIS LUXURY EXISTED, BUT SHE DIDN'T OWN IT

And how’s a Sim to get there? As Angelica Schuyler said – work! Perhaps it comes of having a type-A personality, but I can think of no greater satisfaction than starting a new family with nothing more than the base allocation of 20,000 simoleons and a budget-friendly house, getting them all jobs, and hacking through to the top of their careers, upgrading their lifestyle bit by bit along the way. Yup. That’s the good stuff right there.

## PRICE TAG

*The true cost of retail therapy*



If you’re using a Sim’s spare time or vacation days for relaxing, you’re doing it wrong. Forget family bonding, it’s a prime opportunity for building their skills.

Why go to a bar when you could play chess at home to work on your logic and inch closer to another rung on the ladder? That’ll win you a fat cash bonus, which you can spend on your own goddamn bar to put in the corner of the lounge. Priorities!

## LATE STAGE CAPITALISM

Ignoring all potential avenues for interpersonal drama in favour of the compelling lure of filthy lucre can lead to grinding harder in *The Sims* than you do in your actual, real-life job. Let’s not kid ourselves that this is anything approaching escapism. But I like to give my people what they want, one recently developed a desire to build a swimming pool, for example. Did she harbour a particular yen for butterfly stroke? Nope, she just felt a bit sad that this luxury existed, but she didn’t own it. Who can fail to identify with that?

Even once your Sims are ensconced in their Kevin McCloud-worthy dream home, surrounded by all the gilded possessions their hearts could desire, it’s an unfortunate case of mo’ money, mo’ problems.

Those hefty bills don’t pay themselves, you know, and lifestyle creep is real. Back to work Jim-Bob, you can’t just relax now!

I’m not immune to the fundamental irony at play here, of course – my Sims spend their lives keeping up with the Joneses, except they don’t even know what life is like for the Jones household. They’ve never had time to visit – not when there’s work to be done, a promotion to be won and a new whirlpool bath to be purchased. ♦





# Phil Spencer

Microsoft's executive VP of gaming on **GAME PASS**, **STEAM** and more. *By Samuel Roberts*

**O**n Monday, the day after the Xbox E3 briefing where Game Pass for PC was revealed in full, I had the chance to sit down with Microsoft's Executive Vice President of Gaming Phil Spencer. We talked about the company's approach to selling PC games, its relationship with Steam, and many other things. It's a long read, but hopefully it'll give you a comprehensive overview of where Microsoft sees itself within PC gaming as it stands.

**You're very candid about your history with PC.**

You think I should hide it? You think you guys won't find it? [laughing]

**I feel like you're paying close attention to how you're perceived. How much do you pay attention to the granular feedback of Microsoft's recent past on PC?**

Being honest with you, I'm probably reflecting more on how I feel as a gamer about our own performance as I am looking at feedback. Games for Windows Live, yeah, I've seen the articles, I've seen the comments, but also I play our games, I play our games on PC. I learned to game on PC. It's not hard to look at actions we've taken over the years through the lens of me as a PC gamer and say 'these

are the things that are going to make me question your commitment or motivation to PC gaming', and that's just from my heart more than from a message board or something. I get both, obviously.

**So what does Game Pass represent in the Xbox journey on PC?**

A couple of years ago, more than a couple now, Microsoft Store and Windows launched, we had [UWP] games in there. One of the challenges I had in that time [was], what value were we uniquely bringing to the PC gamer? Between GOG and Steam and stuff there were solutions. If you wanted to go buy PC games, there were solutions for you to go buy PC games. If you were a developer who wanted to reach millions of PC gamers, there were stores that allowed you to reach millions of PC gamers, so it was a little bit unclear what value-add we were bringing other than another storefront.

After I gained a little more control, I guess, in what we were going to do in that space, sitting back in the team and saying 'OK, what unique value can we add in PC?', one was to continue to ship our first-party games on PC and on Xbox at the same time.

Obviously we build those games, that's unique to us. And then Game Pass, as we watched over the last two years there's tremendous success we've had on console, and it's actually been healthy not only for the player but also the creator community in helping them reach new customers. We said 'OK, maybe Game Pass is something we could bring to PC'. We went out and talked and did some focus testing, and went over to my friends at Valve, talked to them about it, and said 'hey, how do people think, is this something we think would be additive to what is already there?'. We got a lot of 'yeah this is something you guys should go try', to bring a gaming subscription that's working for you on Xbox to PC.

What that meant was we were going to have to have a way of

**BELOW:** The Forza Horizon games are the highlight of Microsoft's recent PC releases.







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**I PLAY OUR  
GAMES, I PLAY  
OUR GAMES ON  
PC. I LEARNED  
TO GAME ON PC**

---



» downloading and entitling games on PC, so we effectively were going to have to rework our store, which you can see from the Xbox app now.

But then I didn't want people to think this was our attempt to go and push all the other stores out of the way. In fact, if you want to buy games from us, we want to give you a choice where you buy those games. So the announcement of *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* coming to both Steam and our store was us saying you should be able to buy the games where you want to buy them. We want to make sure the communities are all connected, so we obviously had to work with Valve ensuring that regardless of where you bought the game you'd be one community of PC players together. But Xbox Game Pass for PC was really something that we thought that we could bring that was unique to that ecosystem.

**With Steam specifically, what's your philosophy around releases now? You've named some of the games that you're going to bring to Steam – is your long term plan to bring your back catalogue to Steam and every new game, or is it more selective than that?**

I wouldn't say it's more selective. My expectation is that our games will be available on Steam. You can never say 'always ever', because then something will happen with rights in certain situations where something might not happen, but we have a really good relationship with the team over there.

We go over and talk with Scott Lynch, Erik Johnson and Gabe a lot about the plans we have – it's a good, healthy conversation. So there's nothing in our plans that would say there's a reason we wouldn't continue to ship our games on Steam, and they've been incredibly supportive with us which I appreciate.



On the back catalogue, it's just work, honestly. It's just physics. Are we going to be back and – let's pick something, *Fury3*, I'm showing my age now – I don't know, honestly, on the back catalogue. It would just be about finding the right time to go do it – is there enough demand? I love what we're doing with [*Age of Empires*] right now, taking the *Age* franchise and bringing it back. I love what we're doing with *Flight Sim*, but obviously *Flight Sim* is a new build of that franchise which looks fantastic. The back catalogue is a good question. We don't have a great answer for you right now, but it's not out of the question by any stretch.

**Is it more challenging for multiplayer-focused games like the *Forza Horizon* games and *Sea of Thieves* that are already released?**

No, not really, we've done a good job working with Valve around the multiplayer systems. Let's pick *Sea of Thieves* because I love the game. I think *Sea of Thieves* might have been our most requested game to come to Steam, which I thought was interesting – after we did the announcement of *Halo: The MCC*. *Halo* was clearly number one! With Craig [Duncan] and the team at Rare, and the roadmap of what they're doing with *Sea of Thieves*, we'd obviously have to wrap it in the Steam installer – it's just work. It's not massive work, it's just work in going in and making it happen. Nothing to announce. I'll say Valve has been great to work with, so there's nothing in the relationship that would make it difficult for us to go do that. It would just be finding the right time to go do it. And do we really add something new? I guess that's just a customer that says 'there's no way I'm going to buy it from the store' that we have, and I'm not trying to manipulate what they do through that. The game is available for sale and we're saying 'hey we want to be big supporters of Steam', but I know some people very much want all of their library in one place and I understand that.

**You mentioned wanting to get your games onto as many platforms as possible. Does that include the Epic Games Store and GOG?**

GOG has some specific rules that they set, as does Epic

## WE GO OVER AND TALK WITH SCOTT LYNCH, ERIK JOHNSON AND GABE

**TOP:** *Flight Simulator*'s return is a strong sign of Microsoft's interest in PC gaming.

**FAR LEFT:** *Sea of Thieves* could theoretically come to Steam.





right now, about what games we can put [on them], what other stores they can be available in. We're still in the situation of what I said in the blog post of, we recognise that there are other stores out there. We want to be supportive of the other stores that are at scale. I can also spend a lot of time porting to a ton of different stores and not actually make progress with the games, which I think is the most important part. We focused on Steam because it's the biggest and they were very supportive of the work we wanted in order to make sure our ecosystem stayed connected. So always looking at the future, there's nothing against GOG or EGS that says we wouldn't be able to support those, but right now we're focusing on the two stores that we've announced.

#### Why did you bring *Flight Simulator* back? What led to that moment?

We do have some pilots on the teams that are big fans of flight, and flight sims, and flying themselves, who are passionate about it, so we said, 'OK, let's see what we can do'. *Flight Sim* was a game in our past that sold millions and millions of units and had a very, very passionate community – in fact, they're still out there. So, OK. Can we do something new with *Flight Sim*? Can we actually move it forward in an interesting way?

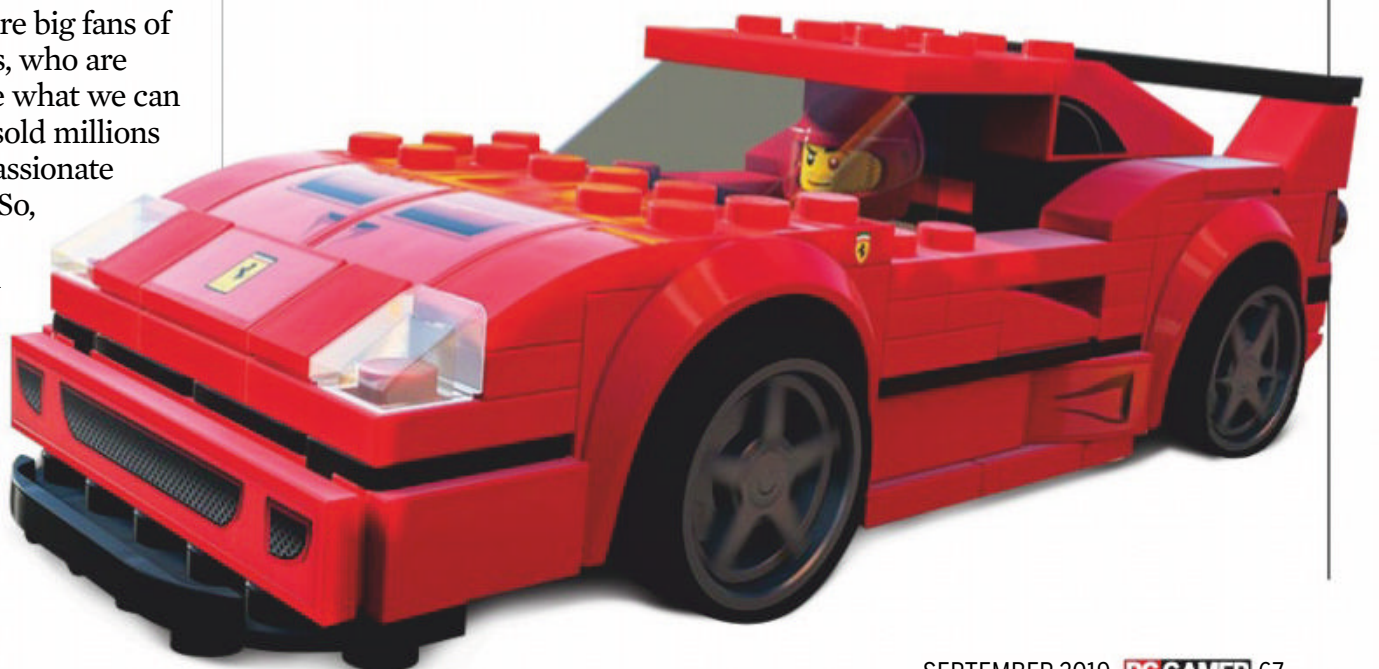
I remember in February or March we were looking at gameplay that we had the option to bring and it was pretty close to what you saw on stage [during the Xbox Briefing], we saw it, the room just went silent as we were looking at this.

Afterwards, it was Shannon Loftis [GM of

Microsoft Studios Publishing] who brought it in, who happens to be a pilot, and I said, 'is that the game?' 'Yeah, that's the game.'

'You're going to have to put at the bottom that that's in-game, because nobody's going to believe that's in-game.' You notice the video says '4K in-game'. And then I said, 'why does it look like that?'. There's two petabytes of geographical data behind that game, that they're then using Azure AI to stitch the seams together so as you're flying, you're seeing a seamlessly connected Earth. I was like 'you've gotta put that in the video because it's one of the coolest things I've ever seen'. It's using real geographical data, real weather data, to give you the ability to literally fly around what looks like a living planet. That's new. To me, that's exciting. They can do it on Xbox and they can do it on Windows and it looks like >>

**ABOVE:** *Sea of Thieves* continues to grow through big updates adding new quests and activities.







» that on stage. This whole thing – ‘can we really put *Flight Sim* in an E3 press briefing, because *Flight Sim*’s kind of its own thing, some people don’t even call it a game’. But it was visually stunning in my mind. Maybe I’m a little bit too close to it.

## WE WENT FLIGHT SIM, WE WENT AGE, WE WENT WASTELAND

**To a PC-specific audience it shows you’re conscious of them and of your history as a company.**

So I’m glad you picked up on that. So Sarah Bond, who’s our head of global partnerships, came out, did the Game Pass work with the indie montage and all those games that were coming to Game Pass, then announced Xbox Game Pass for PC and Xbox Game Pass Ultimate. The next games that were there – I didn’t know if the PC community was going to be watching

or not, but we went *Flight Sim*, we went *Age*, we went *Wasteland* – I wanted people to know that we want to make sure we’re building games and supporting games that respect what the PC community loves.

The first game we announced in the subscription was *Football Manager*. We know that’s a huge game on PC. They don’t bring it to console – they reinforced that today, they’re not bringing it to console – so we want to make sure that PC players understood that we’re going in with our hand open so you can see what our motivation is. We’re going to really put our development capability behind what we’re saying.

**There’s been a big emergence of these subscriber models with Ubisoft announcing theirs this week. What do you make of that? Do you think the market for that might reach critical mass?**

I definitely think you’re going to see a few subscriptions be really viable. I don’t think you’re going to see one to

**RIGHT:** *Halo: The Master Chief Collection* is coming to Steam.







**LEFT:** *Forza Horizon 4: Lego Speed Champions* was a surprise E3 announcement.

rule them all, and I don't think we're going to see a hundred different subscriptions. For us we have a unique position as a platform holder on both Xbox and Windows, we're able to do things like Game Pass Ultimate. We're pan-publisher. We have over a hundred publishers supported right now in Game Pass.

We've supported EA Access on Xbox since the day it launched, so we're not about excluding other people from investing in their business models and what works for them. I'm pretty certain today that Game Pass is the biggest gaming subscription out there, almost certainly.

I do think for us as we get to scale very quickly – [Sunday] was a record-breaking day for us with Game Pass signups – that there will be a critical mass of players and games in that, that we think is very healthy. But I don't think we're going to see a hundred successful gaming subscriptions, I do think it'll consolidate down to a more manageable number for people.

**You say the day of your E3 briefing was a record day for Game Pass. On PC were you happy with the results?**

It was incredible, seriously, it was – in fact I might even have said that our team sandbagged our internal forecasts a bit – but no, it was great, which means something. I'll say our relationship with the PC community has been one of rebuilding trust, and yes people are just signing up, people are just trying now, we can still mess it up, but from the announcement of *Master Chief Collection* coming to PC, to the Xbox game bar and us trying to create real functionality. Not all PC gamers are going to use it, but we're trying to be very explicit that we want to bring value there to the redesign of the Xbox app.

I really do appreciate the PC gaming community's early vote of confidence – I guess it only cost a buck to try [laughs], but seriously, we fundamentally believe we need to and have to be, and should be a constructive part of the PC gamer's lifestyle. Not the only part, but a constructive part of that. The early results even in 24 hours on PC Game Pass have been really great. ■





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# REVIEW

## HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

### DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

### EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

### THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

## OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

**00%-09%** Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

**Example** *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

**10%-19%** We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

**Example** *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

**20%-29%** Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

**Examples** *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

**30%-39%** An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

**Examples** *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

**40%-49%** Flawed and disappointing.

**Examples** *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

**50%-59%** Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

**Examples** *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

**60%-69%** There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

**Examples** *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

**70%-79%** A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

**Examples** *Prey, NieR: Automata*

**80%-89%** A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

**Examples** *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

**90%-94%** A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

**Examples** *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

**95%-96%** Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

**Examples** *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

**97%-100%** Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

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## Forest for the trees

If a Steam game releases off the store's homepage and nobody is around to review it, is it still a 29%? Regular readers may notice that the majority of our review scores land in the top half of our 0-96% spectrum. There's a good reason for this, but it's not the one you'll have seen posited via various forums or Reddit threads. Simply put, there are a lot of PC games and we only have a finite amount of reviewers, time and pages. And so we pick what we think you'll be interested in. But even if we like to focus on the good stuff, the scoring brackets found to the left of my tiny avatar are still in play. All of which is to say that when Malindy gives *Bloodstained* 77%, that's a recommendation. And when Jon gives *Steel Division 2* 61%, it means... well, turn the page to find out.

*Phil Savage*

**PHIL SAVAGE**  
**EDITOR**

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# SongBird & Symphony



The cutest musical platformer ever composed is now available on  
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# BETTER OFF RED

**STEEL DIVISION 2** is an RTS for discerning armchair generals. *By Jonathan Bolding*

**A** grandiose rendering of World War II's Eastern Front, *Steel Division 2* details Operation Bagration, the Red Army's back-breaking push against the Nazi war machine. It's an ambitious real-time strategy game, and though it ultimately fails to live up to a lot of that ambition – especially with its singleplayer campaign – the vastness of its battles captures the scale of total war with lavish detail.

Operation Bagration was the June to August 1944 offensive that threw a huge number of the Soviet army's best troops against the German army in occupied Belarus and Poland. At the same time as the Normandy invasion thousands of kilometres away, the Soviet army surrounded and crushed Germany's Army Group Centre, signalling the end for Germany in the east.

The combatant divisions of troops in this game are weary veterans who have been at war for three years, many equipped with some of the most advanced weapons to be produced during the war.

Others are fresh-faced conscripts and raw recruits, or back-line battalions forced into frontline service by the onrushing offensive. You build your own customised divisions using the composition of these historical formations.

Tactical battles are the heart of the game, real-time conflicts pitting dozens of units against each other in conflicts that feel real. Battles with

ten players on each team, each commanding a couple dozen units, feature prominently in online play and take place on a map so big you couldn't hope to support your furthest ally if you wanted to. It's warfare at a scale that inspires awe when you watch a replay.

**It's warfare at a scale that inspires awe when you watch a replay**

## TAKE COMMAND

*Steel Division 2* pushes realism as far as it can be pushed in the genre and still remain fun – a tank's main gun can

fire massive distances, up to 2,000 metres, and even that kind of range doesn't scratch the width of a map. A multiple-rocket artillery piece can take minutes to reload. Infantry can fight for so long in urban warfare that they run completely dry of their thousands of rounds of ammunition, requiring you to bring in supply trucks with the next wave of reinforcements. *SD2's* tactical play forces you to care about details like force composition and deployment speed and how terrain affects the battlefield. Not in boring, simple ways like light cover or heavy cover, but on

## NEED TO KNOW

### WHAT IS IT?

A grandiose, realistic World War II RTS

### EXPECT TO PAY

£35

### DEVELOPER

Eugen Systems

### PUBLISHER

In-house

### REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i5-3330, GeForce GTX 1070 Ti, 8GB RAM

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes, and it's the best part.

### LINK

[www.steel-division2.com](http://www.steel-division2.com)

a human scale that shapes the world your units move in. Two kilometres is a huge distance to ask your soldiers to charge on foot with people shooting at them. It's not a huge distance for the tank gun taking aim at your men.

Matches are won or lost on the frontline of combat, a coloured line overlaying the field that pushes and pulls as units move. It's satisfying to shift, forming dynamic pockets and bulges and salients. New to *SD2* are capture points, so battles are won by taking notable terrain features: hilltops, bridges, towns, roads. It's a marked improvement from the simple percentage of map control in *Normandy 44*. Interacting with that terrain is simple. The game's built-in range and line of sight checking tool is well made – it's hotkeyed to C – and sliding across the terrain to reveal high ground for overwatch or sheltered dells to advance along is a joy. Battles take place over three phases, A, B, and C, each of which escalates the fight, introduces new units, and changes your income of points to call in those units with.

All of this is quite complex. There are systems for suppression, morale, armour penetration, resupply, repair, surrenders, shock, air combat, cover, and transports, and that isn't an exhaustive list. In an unforgivable sin, there is neither tutorial nor manual to help you learn the basics of the game. The UI is also woefully unequipped to direct you. How much fuel does this particular plane have left? Who are my soldiers shooting at? These are not things it will tell you at a glance.

However the result of all that complexity is a good, historical, tactical RTS. The scale of *Steel Division 2* is simply bigger than *Normandy 44*, and fielding a formation of 12 tanks or hundreds of infantry is no longer the exception in any given battle, it's the rule. The feel of it all fits the historical conflicts of the Eastern Front, battles that alternated between brutal frontal

## MASKIROVKA! Defeating the Hitlerite bandits will require strategy



### RECON UNITS

See the little binoculars on the scout men? The binoculars are for seeing things.



### AT GUNS

Place these in forests, or behind houses, so that they can spring forward and attack.



### ASSAULT INFANTRY

Put them in the middle of a row of houses so enemies get a nasty surprise.



### ARTILLERY

Don't only bombard where you're attacking – use it to keep sections of the enemy line pinned.



### SLEIGHT OF FORCE

Keep troops out of sight behind terrain until you're ready to attack.



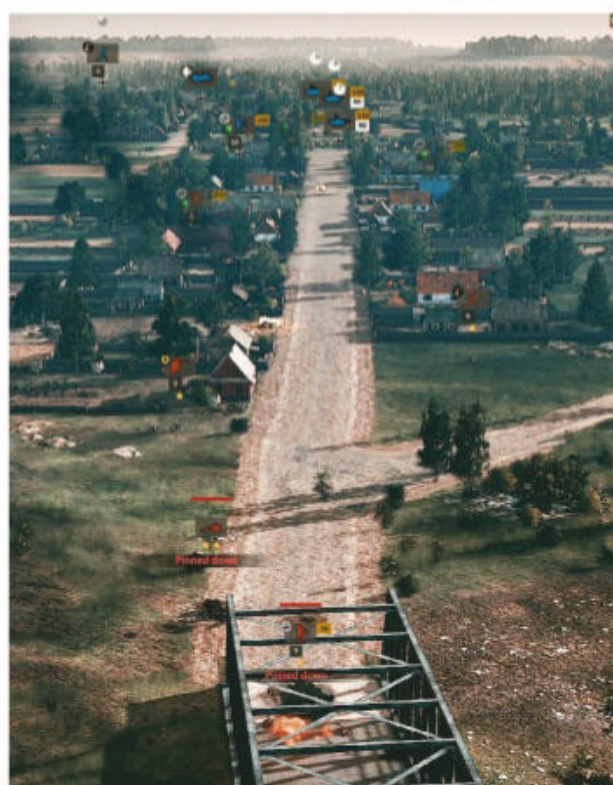
A Flak 88mm in a dominant position on this plateau.



Not every fighter sortie ends in triumph.



The jagdpanzer stalks its prey.



A T-70 covers an infantry advance into this hamlet.



Rocket artillery bombards distant German positions.



The StuG's low profile keeps it safe in the open.



Leased US 'Emcha' tanks are a key Soviet option.



Moving in a column is vulnerable, but fast.





» assaults and slick outmanoeuvring. The maps play into this. Based on ordnance survey and aerial photography from the time, they have a remarkable fidelity and allow for tactical diversity.

One would hope that this fidelity would apply to Army General, the much-hyped singleplayer campaign that scraps *Normandy 44*'s scripted scenarios for a full-on strategic wargame. The sprawling Army General maps are a war table hundreds of kilometres square, each recreating a particular section of Operation Bagration. You're given basic objectives and a historical layout of battalions to move about in turn-based rounds with your opponent. When you clash, you bring some of those battalions into *SD2* skirmishes. This sounds excellent, a partnership of real-time tactics and turn-based strategy. It is anything but.

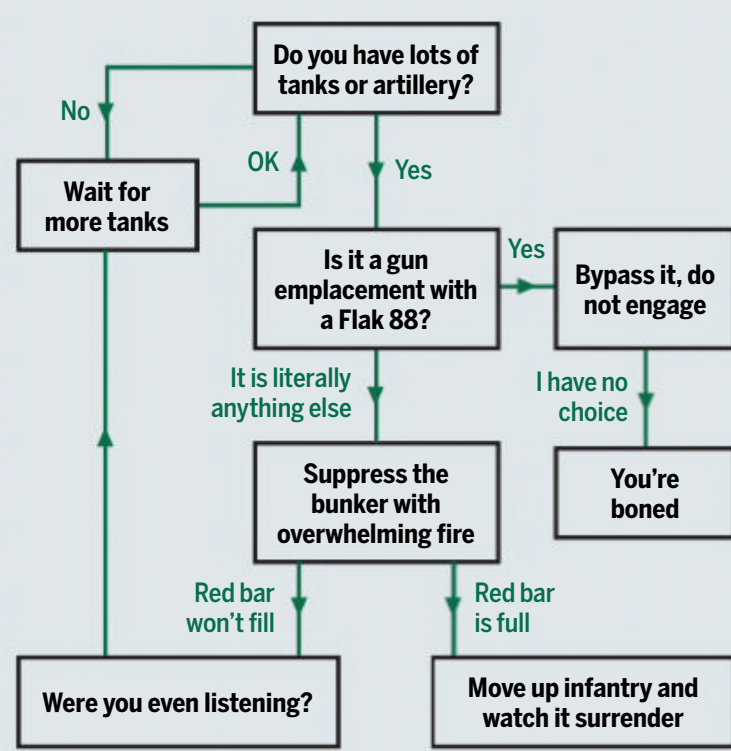
## INFURIATING INTERFACE

Army General suffers from a frustrating, terrible interface and poorly-explained, poorly-suited mechanics. Notably, it does have a manual, but one so vague as to be unhelpful. Units are moved around the map and attack via an action points system, but that system can be baffling to understand because it's married to real-world measurements in kilometres and an invisible grid overlay, with no indication as to why a battalion can't attack enemies or why it's moving so slowly even though you're sure it's on that road and not in the adjacent swamp. It's the worst kind of wargame design: rote and derivative, detailed where it doesn't need to be, abstracted where it hurts gameplay most.

The Army General mechanics even manage to throw off the tactical battles. Deployment phases are thrown out the window in favour of phases based on the position of the battalions on the map. So sometimes you're stuck with no tanks, or no infantry, for half a fight. It's a bizarre choice for a game that otherwise prides itself on realism. Why would the recon group charge the German bunker line rather than wait 20 minutes for the tanks to show up? Worse, the AI is disastrously terrible at taking charge of allied battalions in these matches, turning from the

## BUNKER BUSTING

*How to beat Steel Division 2's brutal new defensive emplacements*



otherwise-competent Skirmish partner into one that bull-headedly chooses a lane on the map and marches up it repeatedly. Also, you can't save during Army General battles, which can take an hour to resolve.

Despite the campaign's shortcomings, the multiplayer and skirmish warfare are still excellent. They feature some great innovations on *Normandy 44*.

Command networks let you link your leaders with a high-ranking officer for greater bonuses to those under their command. Radio-equipped artillery spotters let you lower aim time for your guns, so a well-placed spotter can increase the speed of your bombardments. They're both systems that play into the strength of *Steel Division 2*'s gameplay: planning, foresight, and careful deployment.

The fights for prominent plateaus in particular are some of the most memorable struggles I've had in an RTS for a long time. Another player and I took up opposing positions in two woods on top of a large plateau in a map's centre, with a field running east-west between us and a capture point in the middle. I got there first, the front line pushed out

– the point was mine. I consolidated my position, using the high ground to support allies on either flank with anti-tank fire. I saw that enemies were bringing up some Panzer II light tanks, so I prepared machine guns and a medium tank. I realised too late that their infantry were assault units. Smoke shells made my carefully-prepared killing field moot, and their rush overwhelmed my riflemen while the light tanks flanked. The ridge was lost, I wrote off my surviving troops and saturated it with Katyusha rocket artillery.

## CHOOSE WISELY

The new division building mechanics, on the other hand, are a misstep for the series. While in *Normandy 44* each division's selection of units were locked to a particular phase, *Steel Division 2* lets you take near any unit at any point – the trade off being that you can get more of the unit, or get it at a higher level of veterancy, if it appears in a later battle phase. It makes the process of readying a division for battle painfully fiddly. Do I want two Tigers in phase A, or four in phase B, or two veteran Tigers in phase B, or one elite in phase C? Moreover, it throws off the entire rhythm of the game's multiplayer matches.

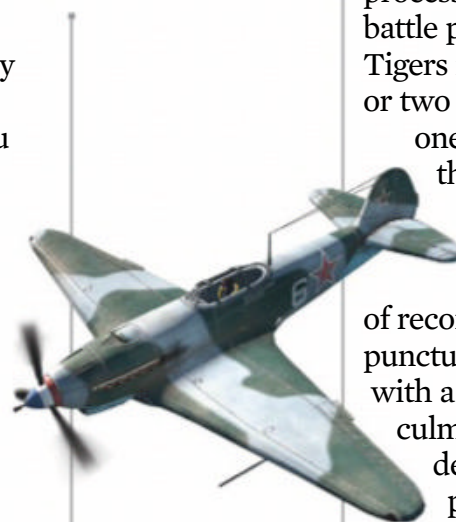
Phase A is no longer a tense manoeuvre of reconnaissance and light vehicles punctuated by a few heavy hitters, with a steady escalation from there culminating in a phase C of desperate last stands and heroic pushes for victory. The realism of phased deployment and careful force structure are out the window. Competitive multiplayer is now an exercise in brutal, calculated abuse of the forces available to you.

*Steel Division 2* is a good game buried under layers of frustrating obfuscation and burdened with a poor singleplayer experience. Every time I was close to getting fully immersed, the game reared up a new, ugly problem. The ambitious bones of a truly great game are there, but ultimately it's hard to recommend this to anyone but those who already love the series' unique multiplayer. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Weighed down by a terrible campaign, this is still a superb multiplayer WWII tactical RTS.

61





# WINNING FORMULA

With scripted drama and F2 racing,  
**F1 2019** spins the wheel. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

**I**t seems obvious now in retrospect. The best way for an annualised, licensed motorsport game to stay fresh every summer when the latest iteration trots out onto the Steam Store is, clearly, to chuck in an entirely different racing series as well. With the inclusion of the 2018 F2 championship, *F1 2019* feels for the first time in the series like a wider world of motorsport, offering that irresistible rags-to-riches journey in career mode and a handling model all of its own to master.

It makes a lot of sense. Codemasters has had the handling down for years now, twitchy and frightening, and giving just the right amount of rumble in your hands as you wrestle your car implausibly fast over an impeccably rendered apex. It needed to add something more than a few handling tweaks, and it did just that by placing a tier of racing below F1 and thus making a contract with the big boys feel like more of a big break.

The way it's brandished in *F1 2019*'s career mode is a bit of a surprise, though. Rather than a full season of F2 racing, it's a scripted sequence of condensed race highlights akin to Codemasters' beloved *TOCA: Race Driver* which kicks off your journey to F1.

Fictionalised drivers Lukas Weber and Devon Butler mix with familiar names like Russell, Norris and Ghiotto, and the former are very much cut from the 'broadly drawn racing stereotype' cloth.

Cocksure English villain with waggly eyebrows: step forward,

Devon. Bavarian stickler for rules and procedure: take a bow, Mr Weber.

That's not necessarily to the detriment of this potted F2 season matinee. What is, however, is the fact it's over so quickly. Barely half an hour passes before you're spat out of the other side of F2 and picking an F1 team. It's possible to participate in a separate F2 season mode – which has no bearing on your career – but it would have been nice to have

the option of working a bit harder for your F1 race seat. As it is, choosing your F2 team determines the level of interest you'll receive from various F1 teams, so your choice does at least feel meaningful even if the season's fleeting.

When you graduate to the big cars, the career mode format takes on a familiar complexion from last year's game. It's once again gratifying to earn the trust of your team by hitting their performance targets, and gain increasing access to its RPG-like upgrade tree for car development, spending upgrade points to allocate

## My Williams was in dire need of aero upgrades

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
The latest licensed F1 racer, now with added cutscenes

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£45

**DEVELOPER**  
Codemasters

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
i5 8600k, RTX 2080 ti, 16GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Up to 20 players

**LINK**  
[www.codemasters.com/game/f1-2019](http://www.codemasters.com/game/f1-2019)



to particular areas. My Williams was in dire need of aero upgrades in my debut season for example, whereas the Renault-powered teams need to find engine performance to bridge the gap to Mercedes – impressively granular detail.

But there's a twist in the tale – Lukas Weber and Devon Butler graduate to F1 along with you, replacing two real drivers and popping up in cutscenes which amp up the sense of rivalry (and, to be honest, am-dram theatre).

Butler and Weber are free to drive wherever the game takes them, so they might even become your teammate at some point.

And for the first time, other drivers are free to change teams too, so you may well see Hamilton in a Ferrari. Roger Ebert probably wouldn't have been impressed by the cutscenes, but this rivals plotline really does work.

### ON THE PODIUM

A new leagues system and improved race highlights mode both bolster *F1 2019*'s esports cred, which is good news for pro sim racers and those aspiring to be the next Brendon Leigh alike. I'm still not totally sold on the virtual stewards and how they dole out penalties, but I've yet to play a racing sim online that has cracked that particular nut agreeably.

This isn't a tangible leap forward in the fundamentals of the *F1* series – the handling and visuals remain roughly where they were last year, which is to say: excellent.

What Codemasters has managed to add into the series in an impressively short span though is a wealth of new solo content that enriches career mode and offers a totally different challenge outside it. ■

## LOUD AND PROUD *Delightfully obnoxious multiplayer liveries*



### CNH2N+2ENERGY - TIGER

Pretty sure there's a magic eye hidden on this one, but it hurts too much to look at.



### DISTORT - INTERFERENCE

There's a reason this kind of camo doesn't appear in nature – animals have better taste.



### OVOLO - FLUID DYNAMICS

"Can you make it any greener? What if you painted a greener green on top of the green?"



### VENUS - STRIPE WIPE

The driveable manifestation of a printer jam, yours to own and compete in.

### PC GAMER VERDICT

Goes beyond what anyone could expect of an annualised series, retaining immaculate handling and visuals.

91



You get used to that ungainly halo surprisingly quickly in first-person mode.



AI drivers take it very steady in wet conditions.



Alexander Albon here, burning a hole of pure hatred into his fictional teammate's head.



Happy TOCA Race Driver memories abound.



The stewards are going to earn their paycheck figuring this one out.





# DROWN AND OUT

**THE SINKING CITY** is a detective game with a Lovecraftian twist. *By Andy Kelly*

**P**lagued by nightmarish visions of a drowned city and a colossal tentacled beast, private detective Charles Reed travels to the town of Oakmont to find answers. Storms have been battering this once thriving fishing community, cutting it off from the mainland, flooding parts of it, and leaving the rest sodden and dilapidated. And to make matters worse, the locals are deeply suspicious of outsiders. But with the source of these harrowing visions lurking somewhere in the city, Reed has no choice but to get his feet wet.

*The Sinking City* is a third-person detective adventure set in a fictional version of 1920s New England, inspired by the works of influential (and, yes, controversial) horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. Divers uncover an ancient cavern hidden beneath Oakmont filled with otherworldly statues of cosmic demons, and are driven mad by the discovery – a madness that begins to spread through the city and awakens strange, violent creatures the locals call wylebeasts. The game is divided between solving crimes and shooting monsters, although the gulf in quality between each flavour of play is pretty wide.

Ukrainian developer Frogwares has been making *Sherlock Holmes* games for over a decade now, including 2014's magnificent *Crimes & Punishments*. As such, *The Sinking City* is a decent detective game – particularly in its use of the blatantly *Sherlock*-inspired Mind Palace system. As you explore a crime scene you collect clues that, while useless on their own, can be connected in the Mind Palace to open up new lines of investigation. And you have to make these connections yourself, without any hand-holding or hints, which makes a successful deduction very satisfying.

But while *Sherlock Holmes* has to rely entirely on his intelligence and intuition to solve a mystery, Reed has a supernatural advantage. In certain locations a glowing blue portal will open up, through which he can witness whichever crime transpired there. These vignettes come in the

form of shimmering silhouettes of the people involved and fragments of speech. Reed must then construct a narrative, figuring out the order these echoes of the past occurred in, which will usually result in a new clue appearing in the Mind Palace.

My biggest issue with *The Sinking City*, at least as a detective game, is that the cases aren't that interesting. One of the greatest

strengths of Frogwares' *Sherlock* games is encountering a confounding mystery – say, a murder occurring in a room locked from the inside – and being overcome with a desire to solve it. But I rarely felt that compulsion here, and the solutions to many of the cases lacked a satisfying 'aha!' moment – the punchline that should round off any good detective story. In leaving *Holmes* behind, the developer's knack for writing a solid mystery seems to have suffered.

Reed is also a completely charmless protagonist, with none of *Holmes*' wit, quirks, or nuance. He's the worst kind of grim, gravel-voiced private dick stereotype and I really struggled to love him.

**The Sinking City's dreary setting is also hard to love**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A Lovecraft-inspired detective adventure

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£50

**DEVELOPER**  
Frogwares

**PUBLISHER**  
Bigben Interactive

**REVIEWED ON**  
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.thesinkingcity.com](http://www.thesinkingcity.com)

## SHOT IN THE DARK

As for the over-the-shoulder gun combat, it's perfectly functional, but feels like a box being ticked rather than a vital part of the game. Bullets being Oakmont's primary form of currency (it's a long story) adds an interesting element of ammo conservation to each wylebeast encounter. But mostly I was just eager for the shooting to stop so I could resume being a detective. There's a simple crafting system in there too, letting you make health kits, ammo, and other useful items from scrap gathered in the world. But, like the combat, this is all rather rote. I feel like *The Sinking City* would be a better, more consistent game if it focused purely on the detecting aspect.

*The Sinking City*'s dreary setting is also hard to love. It's an open world game, letting you freely explore the streets of Oakmont. And while I love having to follow directions and pay attention to street names to find important locations, this bleak, muddy, perpetually rain-soaked city is a thoroughly depressing space to exist in. There's some nice world-building, including districts that have been almost completely submerged, with only the tops of lamp posts poking out of the murky water. But overall the city feels disappointingly lifeless, with robotic NPCs wandering aimlessly, repetitive scenery, and a forgettable, droning soundtrack adding to the sense of gloom.

There's a good, but not great, detective game lurking here, but as a package, it doesn't quite work. The open world isn't interesting enough to compel you to explore it, the combat is basic and uninspiring, and the writing and construction of the mysteries are generally quite poor. ■

## BAD INFLUENCE

*How Lovecraftian is The Sinking City?*

- |                            |                            |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| ✓ Ancient, unknowable evil | ✗ Casual racism            |
| ✓ New England setting      | ✗ Terrible poetry          |
| ✓ Things with tentacles    | ✗ Overly descriptive prose |
| ✓ Subterranean horrors     | ✗ Giant penguins           |

## PC GAMER VERDICT

An occasionally entertaining detective game blighted by poor writing, rote combat, and a dreary open world.

**66**



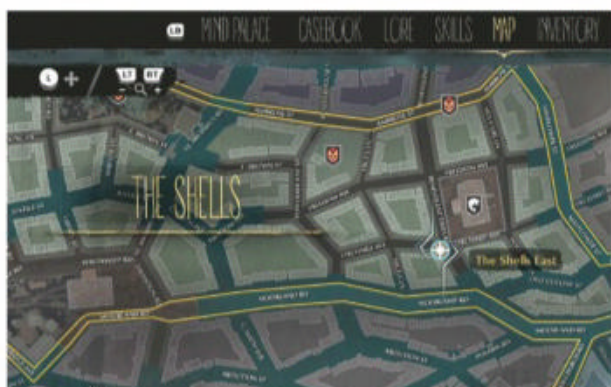
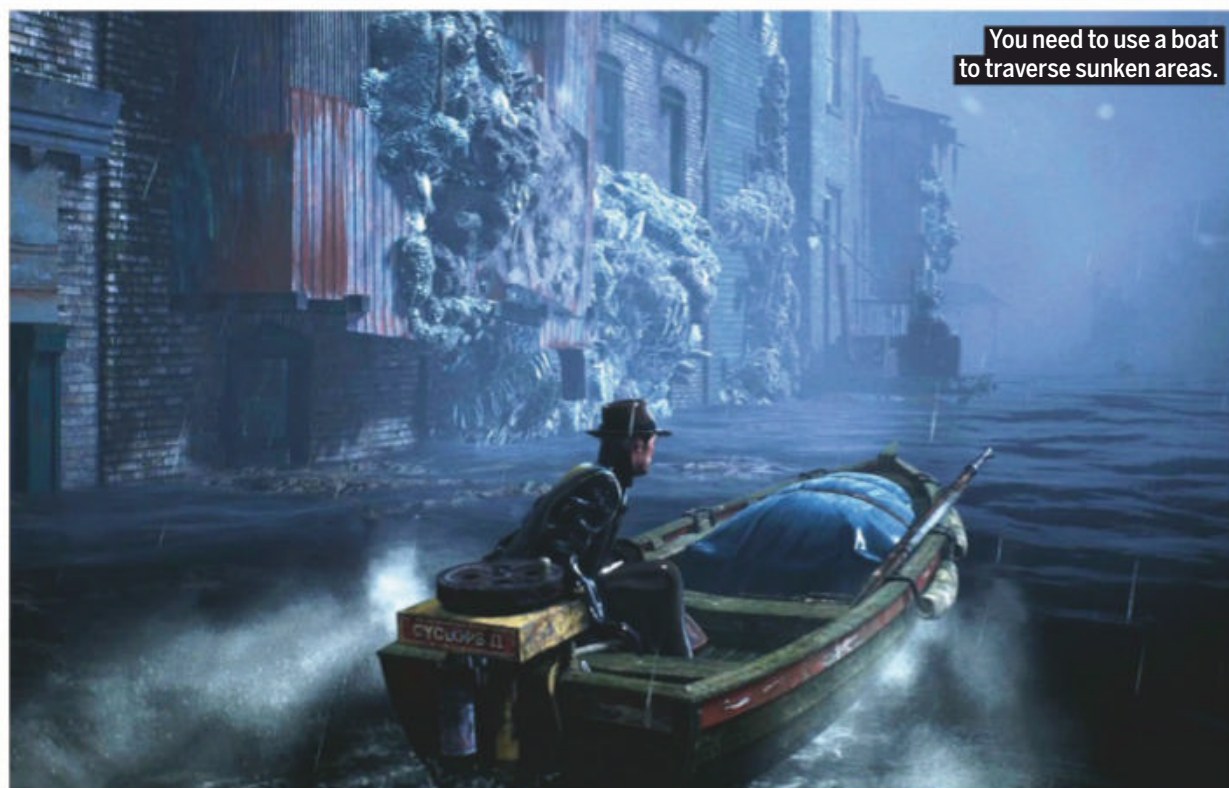
The cops will turn on you if you fire your gun in public.



Much of the game is spent interrogating witnesses.



You need to use a boat to traverse sunken areas.

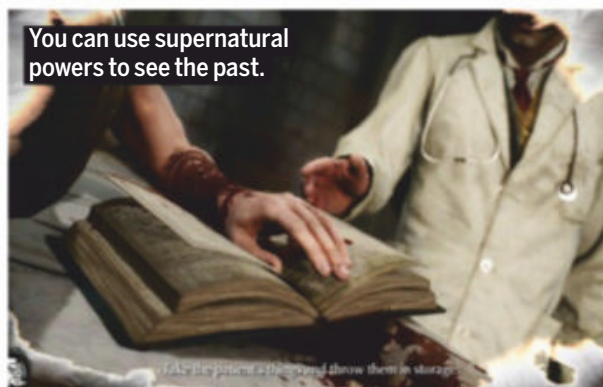


On occasion the detecting aspects are engaging.



Shot dead, point-blank.

You can use supernatural powers to see the past.





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# CASTLE MANIA

With **BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT**, Koji Igarashi created a homage to his own games. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

**F**ive years ago Koji Igarashi, director and writer on *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night*, left Konami to make another *Castlevania*-style game. Five years is a long time, and the Metroidvania genre has grown substantially in that period, but sometimes you don't want a variation on a familiar theme. You want the same game in a new package. Rejoice, because with *Bloodstained: Ritual of the Night*, that's exactly what you're getting.

Miriam is a science experiment in the shape of a dolled-up anime girl. Together with her friend, a man named Gebel, she was part of an experiment that transplanted the essence of demons into her body. This demonic power comes in the form of shards, thus she's called a Shاربinder. The more shards you absorb the more you let go of your humanity, a fate that befell Gebel.

Gebel is now out to fill the world with demons, all from the comfort of his castle – because of course there is a castle. It's a sprawling place full of heavy chandeliers, grim-looking statues and monsters keeping watch. From the entrance hall to the gardens, towers and even the caves below, every inch of this castle is waiting to be explored and plundered, and for the most part its backdrops are varied enough to make you want to see what's around the next corner.

Combat is the main focus, and on normal difficulty most enemies don't pose much of a threat. Early on a nice rhythm between exploration and

combat builds, and feels very genre-specific in the way you anticipate the respawning enemies and find increasingly fun, increasingly quick ways to deal with them. To this end you regularly find

new weapons to try out on an unsuspecting demon's hide. Each weapon has a different range and animation, which are important aspects in sequence breaking smaller enemies and getting hits in with bosses.

Compared to the rest of the game, the boss fights present a tough challenge, but as so often with Metroidvanias, at one point it clicks and careful study of attack timings and/or a bit of luck pays off. It's satisfying every time.

## KITCHEN SINK

The various shards you collect by repeatedly killing monsters of the same type are infrequently necessary for progression and almost exclusively exist for fun and variety. I can't stress enough how *Bloodstained* is brimming with stuff at all times. Shards come in the form of summons, projectiles and special

**Every inch of this castle is waiting to be explored and plundered**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A 2.5D Metroidvania that is all 'vania

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£40

**DEVELOPER**  
ArtPlay/Inti Creates/  
WayForward

**PUBLISHER**  
505 Games

**REVIEWED ON**  
Core i5-8400, GTX  
1060, 16 GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
Eventually  
[www.505games.com](http://www.505games.com)

attacks and almost every weapon that conceivably made sense to put into the game. Later on you also gain various familiars, floating spirits that further aid you in battle. This massive selection makes it a real shame that *Bloodstained*'s enemies don't offer the same variety. You encounter a fair share of visually interesting types from floating schnauzer faces to an Edward Scissorhands-type demon, but their move sets and patterns are so simple there's never much of a reason to fiddle with your arsenal.

Additionally, there's no way to attack up or downwards, which is the ultimate proof *Bloodstained* was designed as a throwback experience. Your bursting inventory doesn't win points for usefulness as much as it simply appeals to the part of our brains that wants to collect all the things. That's also the only reason for crafting meals for tiny stat buffs in the village or for visiting the castle's demon barber who lets you switch outfits – as if you're browsing a shopping mall rather than a house of horrors. Finding your way around can stump you sometimes, but backtracking is made easy through genre-typical fast travel rooms.

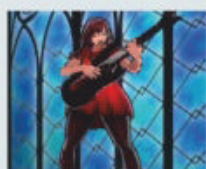
There is a point to be made for Metroidvanias that aren't tough as nails these days, which is why *Bloodstained* is likely to appeal to newcomers. But, like the vampires it so reveres, it's starting to feel long in the tooth when compared to the innovation found elsewhere in the genre. It's a neat little time capsule of a game, an amusing diversion with a flow that makes time flow swiftly until you're brickwalled by a boss, but it's the very definition of been-there-done-that if you've ever played a Metroidvania before. Sometimes that's all you want. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

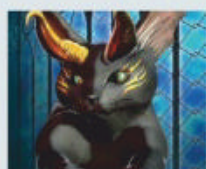
*Bloodstained* is a feast for fans of a very specific experience; but too old-fashioned for anyone else.

**77**

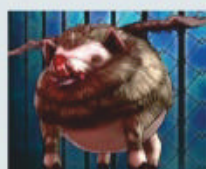
## PET SHOP OF HORRORS *Some standout monsters*



**TAMAKO-DEATH**  
This is likely a joke on a co-worker. He rocks hard and drops strawberries.



**KAMIKAZE**  
One of multiple cat demons, but this one has the funkiest makeup.



**PLUME PARMA**  
The floating pig deserves an award for the name alone.



**EIGHT BIT OVERLORD**  
A homage, this enemy was inspired by Dracula's final form in *Castlevania*.





Bloodstained frequently produces some really amazing backgrounds.





# RISING DAMP

**HEAVY RAIN** is an atmospheric murder mystery that frequently shoots itself in the foot. *By Andy Kelly*

**I**n a gloomy, perpetually rain-soaked American city where smoke-spewing factories loom over rows of dreary suburban homes, a serial murderer is on the loose. The killer's calling card is an origami animal, and four very different people find themselves swept up in his wave of terror: journalist Madison Paige, FBI agent Norman Jayden, private detective Scott Shelby, and architect Ethan Mars, whose son has been kidnapped by this so-called Origami Killer.

What exactly is *Heavy Rain*? Well, it's an adventure game of sorts, with a heavy focus on *Shenmue*-style QTEs. That means a lot of button-tapping and stick-waggling, whether it's one character shaking a carton of orange juice before taking a swig or another swinging a fist in a punch-up. Occasionally you can wander around freely, and the environments are beautifully detailed. But most of the time you're watching cutscenes, deciding how they play out via a series of timed, reaction-based button prompts.

But here's what makes *Heavy Rain* worth playing despite its amateurish, hole-ridden plot, inhuman dialogue, and inconsistent tone. It's actually one of the most twisting, structurally complex, and reactive interactive stories on PC. While a Telltale game will let you carve your own path to a single ending, with only slight variations, it's actually possible for every main character to die in *Heavy Rain*. And the final outcome will be

wildly different depending on the many choices you make across its ten or so hours of play.

The plot is *Baby's First Thriller* and the characters are humourless and hard to love, but there's no

denying that this is an interactive story in the truest sense. Some of the QTEs are comically easy, allowing you to fail multiple times before you're punished. But when a major screw-up can lead to a character dying, the

stakes always feel high. Incidentally, as a former PlayStation exclusive, *Heavy Rain* was designed for a gamepad – and you should play it with one. There's a huge amount of rapid button-mashing in its action sequences, which to me felt clumsy and unnatural on a keyboard.

I wish I had more nice things to say about *Heavy Rain*, but I'm spent. For one, it's incredibly pretentious. It thinks it's telling a searingly mature, provocative story, but cheapens this constantly with schlocky *Saw*-inspired shock horror, the frequent

**It's actually possible for every main character to die in *Heavy Rain***

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
The PC debut of PlayStation's serial killer mystery

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£16

**DEVELOPER**  
Quantic Dream

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.quanticrodream.com](http://www.quanticrodream.com)

and gratuitous sexualisation of Madison Paige, and one of the most rushed, unconvincing, and cack-handed romances in the history of fiction. Honestly, if you saw this in the cinema you'd walk out, or at least hurl popcorn at the screen. There are some glimmers of imagination, such as Norman Jayden's reality-bending AR glasses, but mostly it's a game made up almost entirely of tired Hollywood clichés.

## FRESHEN UP

It looks great, though. I'll give it that. *Heavy Rain* is almost a decade old, originally appearing on PlayStation 3, but was recently remastered for a PS4 release with improved textures, models, and lighting – which is the version we get on PC. The facial animation betrays its age sometimes, but this industry-ravaged, rain-sodden city – never named, but based on Philadelphia – is an effectively atmospheric setting. It's relentlessly grim, with roach motels, scummy apartments, and abandoned warehouses making up the bulk of its large list of locations, but this suits the downbeat nature of the story.

*Heavy Rain* is a weird one. The story is genuinely interactive, with many branching paths and sudden deaths, as well as a slew of different endings. In that sense, I really enjoy playing it. But as a piece of storytelling, and as a murder mystery, it's really quite poor. When you're laughing at scenes that were meant to be powerfully dramatic and emotional, you know something has gone wrong. But for all its faults I'm glad to see it on PC, because there's an interesting game lurking in there somewhere, drowning in a storm drain, occasionally poking its head above the water for a gasp of air. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Heavy Rain* is poorly written and not as smart as it thinks it is, but has a genuine sense of choice and consequence.

**69**

## QUAD DAMAGE *The four playable characters*



### ETHAN MARS

Architect whose family is destroyed when his son is killed in an accident. Then his other son is kidnapped by the Origami Killer.



### MADISON PAIGE

A journalist suffering from insomnia and nightmares. An encounter with Ethan leads her to investigate the Origami Killer.



### NORMAN JAYDEN

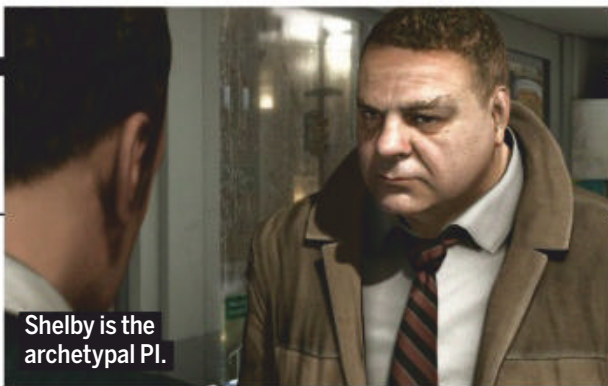
A talented, and secretly drug-addicted FBI agent who has been sent to assist the police in the hunt for the Origami Killer.



### SCOTT SHELBY

A private detective who is also hunting for clues about the Origami Killer. He has a partner of sorts in Lauren Winter.





Shelby is the archetypal PI.



Engaging in a spot of parenting.



Ethan searches for his kidnapped son.



Things get weirder later in the game.



The lighting is very atmospheric.



Shelby interviews a bereaved mother.



# A-PEELING

A banana teaches you to kill in  
**MY FRIEND PEDRO**. By Jody Macgregor

**T**he gamers running at me have swords, because all gamers own swords, I guess. They also have Monty Python *Dark Souls* cosplay armour but it can't save them from the shotgun blasts that reduce them to lumps at my feet. I'm out of ammo before I'm out of gamers, the last one charging with sword held high. But any object you kick is a one-shot kill in this game, and dead gamer lumps are kickable objects.

There are more impressive gun-fu stunts in *My Friend Pedro* than breaking somebody's neck by kicking their dead friend's torso at them, but this moment of improvisation is typical of what happens between gif-able highlights.

Once or twice per level I'll do something absurd like skateboarding through a window then kicking that skateboard at someone while shooting someone else, or throwing a frying pan into the air then ricocheting bullets off it to clear a room.

But the meat and potatoes of *My Friend Pedro* isn't these setpieces. It's jumping in and relying on the combination of a generous slow-mo meter, physics objects, and a lot of bullets to see you through.

## BANANA DRAMA

I should mention the talking banana. His name is Pedro and he's full of potassium and advice on how to kill people, whether retired mafiosi or Christmas-themed bounty hunters or gamers driven to madness by violent videogames. There's a story in *My*

*Friend Pedro* but a minimal one – it feels like the plot of another hyperviolent Devolver game, *Ruiner*, only told on fast-forward. Pedro is there to explain things, but more importantly he appears in the corner of the screen when you pull off a high-scoring combo and tells you what rank you got at the end of a level.

**He's full of potassium and advice on how to kill people**

It's a score-attack game, with bonus points for chaining together kills in combos. There are leaderboards, and I have replayed several levels just to get a higher rank on them. Chasing high scores makes me look ahead at a level and think things like, "I should ride the barrel onto that guy then jump off while dual-wielding and split my fire so I can shoot that one and the other before I land."

Split-fire looked neat in the gifs *Pedro's* designer showed off during development, but I was worried it would feel rough in play. I was super wrong. It's easy – right-click on one dude and hold to lock him in, and then for every left-click shot, no matter where it's aimed, the

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
2D action-platforming bullet ballet

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£16

**DEVELOPER**  
DeadToast

**PUBLISHER**  
Devolver

**REVIEWED ON**  
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No

**LINK**  
[www.devolverdigital.com/games/my-friend-pedro](http://www.devolverdigital.com/games/my-friend-pedro)

right-click guy gets a bullet as well. Levels that drop you down shafts with enemies on both sides, or have doors full of goons opening around you, are built for this. I never stopped enjoying it.

These are also fine moments for dodging by pressing W, which sends you into a bulletproof pirouette. Shooting while dodging sends bullets flying in whichever direction your guns happen to be pointing during that part of the animation, wild sprays flying around as you whirl about like a dog in a tumble dryer. Again, enjoyable.

## COMBO BREAKER

Later levels reduce the amount of physics objects like skateboards, basketballs, and knives, as well as goons to fling them at, in favour of mines, lasers, spinning platforms, and traps that require more perfectionist play. There's not as much freedom to rack up combos and a lot more falling to your death. They're less fun to replay, but before long there's always a refresher level that plays like something completely different, a motorbike chase or a freefall or a boss fight.

To pay *My Friend Pedro* the highest compliment, its boss fights didn't annoy me. They're bombastic, inventive, and they're over fast.

Along with the score, at the end of every level Pedro gives you a gif of a highlight to save or share. Postcards from murderland, they slice *My Friend Pedro* into a handful of enjoyable seconds. Its take on bullet-time is fun for more than seconds, though.

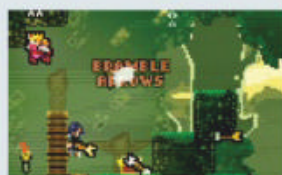
Unlike *Superhot* or *Max Payne* I never got tired of it, thanks to short levels, high variety, and a storyline that's purest nonsense. ■

**PC GAMER** VERDICT

Barrel through the story once for a laugh, then replay the best levels until you are John Wick on a skateboard.

**81**

## SUPER FLASH Like My Friend Pedro, these hits all started as Flash games



### TOWERFALL ASCENSION

This multiplayer game was originally singleplayer.



### SUPER MEAT BOY

Began life as just plain *Meat Boy* on Newgrounds.



### VVVVVV

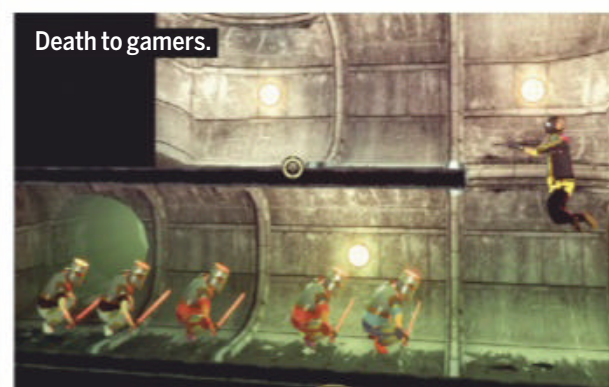
Terry Cavanagh's anti-gravity platformer was already hard as nails.



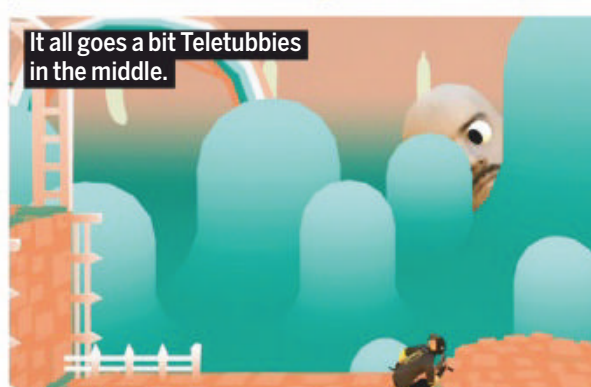
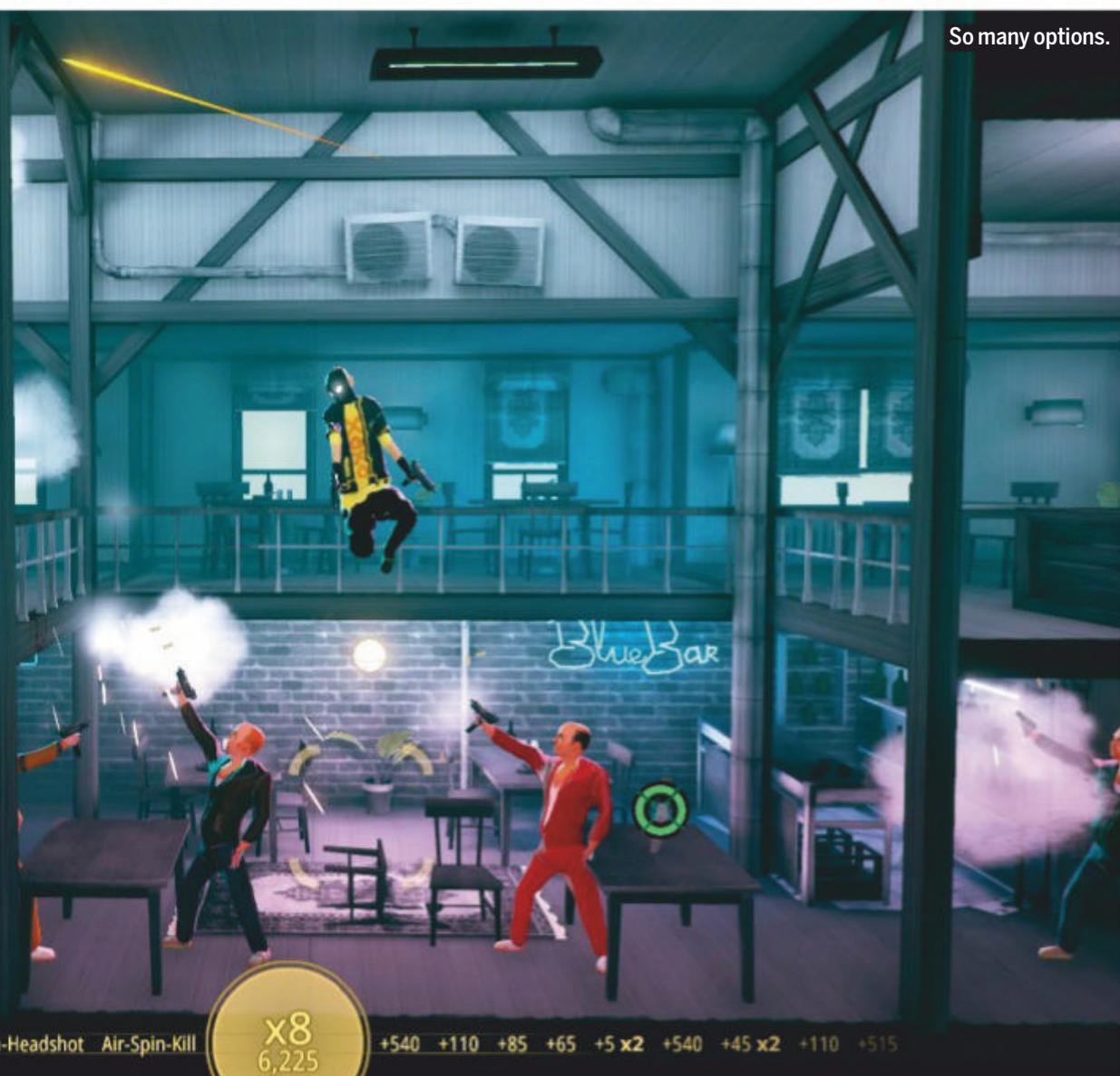
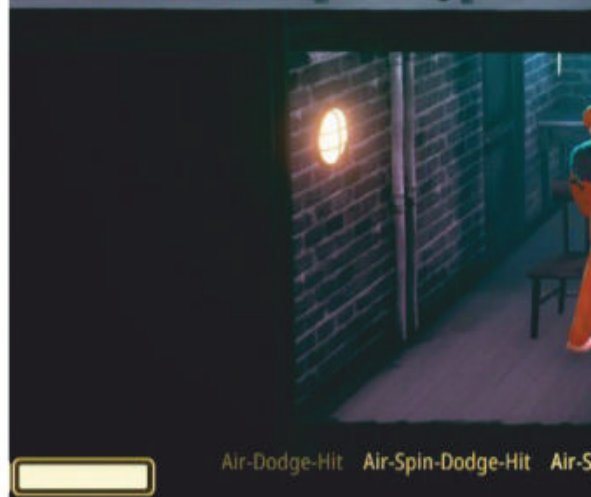
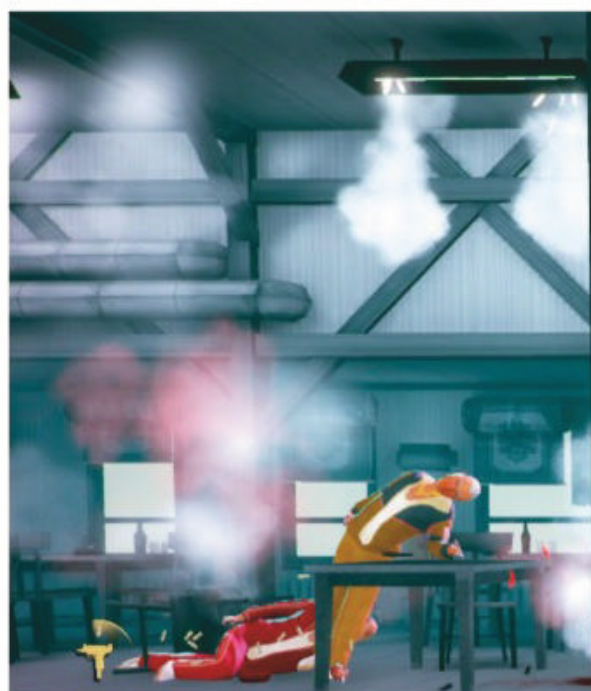
### LUFTRAUSERS

The game of 2D aerial combat was once a Flash game called *Luftrauser*.





It just keeps getting weirder.



It all goes a bit Teletubbies in the middle.



Hunter

What the... That's the guy!



# THE THICK OF IT

There's a lot of evil in **AMID EVIL**, but don't worry, because you can use planets as grenades. *By Tyler Wilde*

**A**mid Evil's worst weapon is a staff that shoots blue homing blobs – pathetic water balloons that splash against low-poly demons, many of whom look like what you'd get if you coated a bunch of triangles with super glue and threw them in a dryer. I don't like it or the moments when I resort to it, but I can also use the entire Earth as a grenade, which more than evens things out. *Amid Evil* is good.

It's a throwback FPS like *Dusk*, but rather than the hitscan headshots, *Amid Evil* recalls *Heretic* and *Hexen*'s magical weapons. The staff sucks, but there's also a magic sword, a grenade launcher that shrinks and fires planets (like the Earth), a spike-firing morningstar, a lightning trident, plus your axe and a geometrically-unreasonable purple thing that clears rooms like *Doom*'s BFG.

Most of the weapons are fun, but the Star of Torment, which pins enemies to walls like *FEAR*'s stake gun, or can be used to homer them out of the level entirely like they've been slapped by a god, is *Amid Evil*'s pièce de résistance – I never tire of it.

Part of *Amid Evil*'s appeal is that it ignores certain annoying, speed-hindering FPS conventions scaffolded onto shooters since the late '90s. There's no fall damage. You can breathe underwater. Elevators won't crush you if they catch your shoulder on the way down. They'll just clip through you as they should. Accidental deaths have their place in games, especially when they're comedic, but here they'd only get in the way of the fun, and the speed. They aren't missed.

*Amid Evil* falls prey to other genre foibles, though. Getting out of water is a pain in the ass. And then there's the platforming, and you probably already know the type. Here's a game about running very fast all the time because there's a mob of demons chasing you, so how about you climb spiralling, ultra-narrow balance beams and leap between platforms that disappear on a timer?

Also slowing things down are the gods' architectural designs. You're the latest mortal champion taking a stab

at cleaning up their evil-infested lands, and except for the boss stages, every level is a button hunt. Body-check one of the big blue switches, and something about the level changes: an elevator activates, a

door opens, the water level rises. And then you go find the next button to walk face-first into until you eventually find a key to open up the next big area, just like in the classics.

## The Star of Torment fires clumps of homing crystals

## CHEATER, CHEATER

*Amid Evil is loaded with cheats, here's some!*

**AEOMG:** God mode. Then who needs the gods?

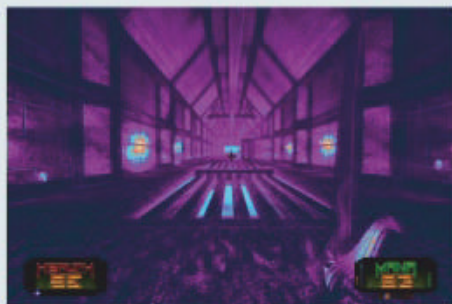
**AERO:** Fly. It feels great to fly.

**AESTHETIC:** Toggles vaporwave mode. (Pictured, though you can't hear the chill tune.)

**AE1981:** Toggles a horrid CGA palette.

**AEURP:** Burps. Massively.

**AELYPICS:** Makes you go unreasonably fast. Still not fast enough.



## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
An FPS inspired by Raven Software classics *Hexen* and *Heretic*

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£15.50

**DEVELOPER**  
Indefatigable

**PUBLISHER**  
New Blood Interactive

**REVIEWED ON**  
Windows 10, Core i7-6700K, 16GB RAM, GeForce GTX 980

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[www.amidevil.com](http://www.amidevil.com)

## SOUL SACRIFICE

That's not really why I liked the classics. I love *Amid Evil*'s big open levels – the way some of them fit together, especially the one made of moving gears – and they're full of secret areas to discover. But kicking around demon guts as I retrace my steps to try to figure out which damn pathway the last button opened up isn't as fun as pinning demons to walls with the Star of Torment, which is very fun. When I'm just tearing through evil knights and stone giants and weird heads with flamethrower mouths, and I'm more kite than man, *Amid Evil* shines like the best of *Quake* and *Serious Sam*.

My favourite thing about *Amid Evil* is that while its hard mode is challenging, just about every bad situation is salvageable – it feels nearly ideal to me, as difficulty goes. A couple of tools help. One is quicksaving but there's also the part where you go Super Saiyan.

Slain enemies drop souls, and if you fill a meter with them, you can activate Soul Mode, which turns all of your weapons into fire hoses of death. The Star of Torment fires clumps of homing crystals that one-hit just about anything and explode outward on contact to clean up nearby grunts. Whisper's Edge fires bigger waves that always pierce enemies and bounce off walls. The BFG-like Aeturnum, which often saved my ass when I needed to vaporise a room without a real fight, fires black holes.

Despite barely telling a story, *Amid Evil* made me wonder if the gods might be the real assholes – they were the ones who put buttons everywhere, after all – and when it was over I lingered for a long time before letting it end. I want more. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

*Amid Evil* is a fast, stylish throwback that's at its best when the screen is full of enemies.

86



Fights can become a mess of ugly triangle men quickly.



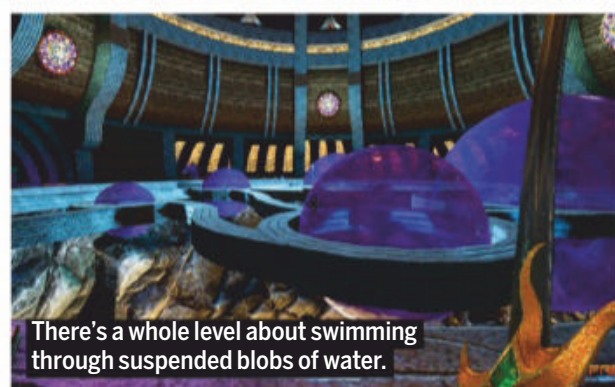
PICKED UP A SMALL SOUL  
PICKED UP A SMALL SOUL



It actually looks really cool in motion. I swear.



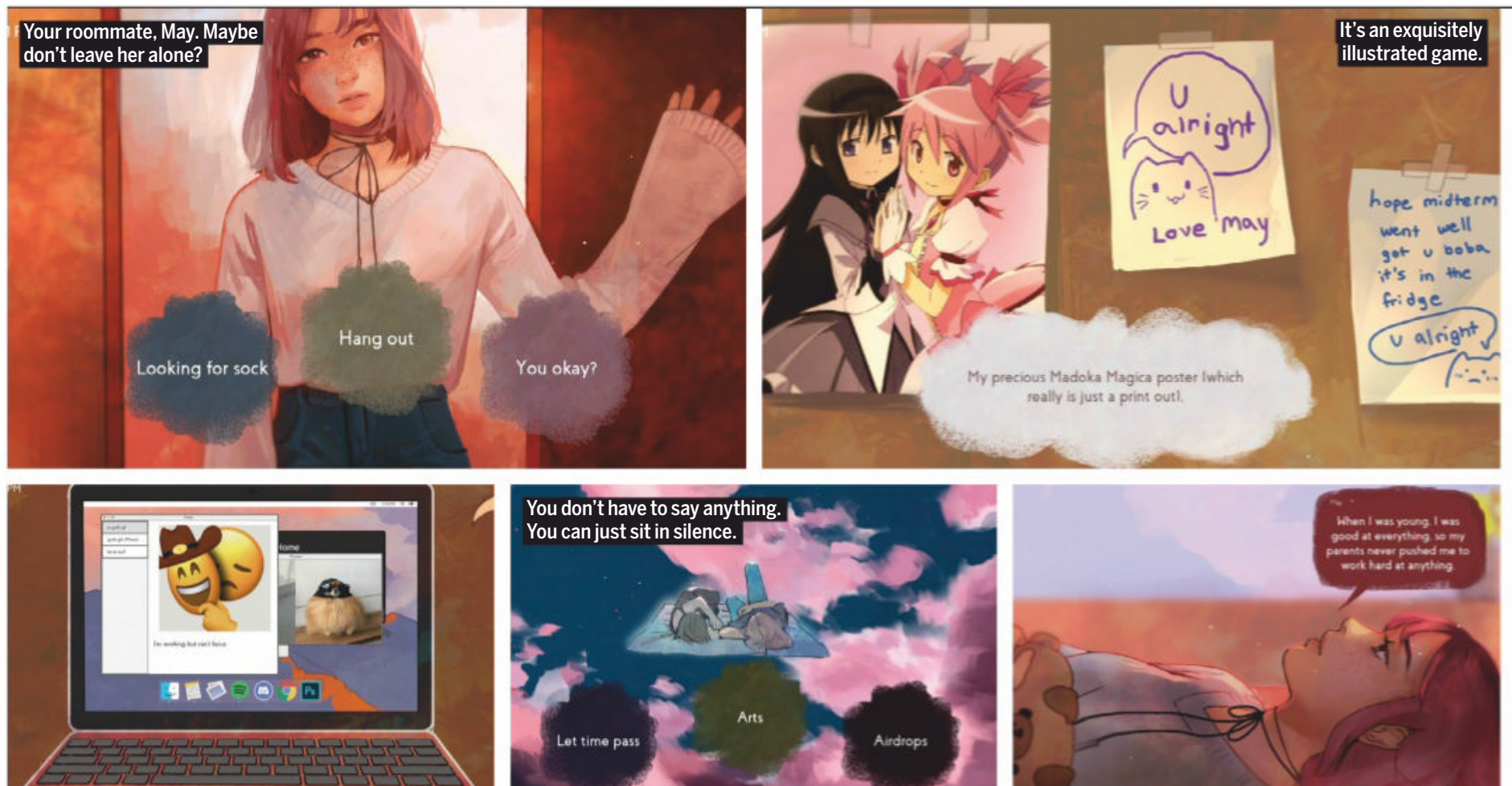
There's a whole level about swimming through suspended blobs of water.



Some games just don't screenshot well. This is a purple fight I had with space serpents.



Missed Messages



# BE KIND, REWIND

Trying desperately to save a friend in **MISSED MESSAGES**. By Tom Sykes

**Y**ou're sat at your computer, trying to write. Perhaps you have an essay to submit, or an important email to send. Whatever it is, you probably shouldn't give in to distraction and respond to the instant message that's just popped up on your screen. That's the premise of *Missed Messages* – a gorgeous and affecting visual novel where you, of course, immediately reply to a photo sent by someone known as 'goth gf'.

I mean, what else are you going to do? Finish your essay? You have plenty of choices to make in this brief yet replayable interactive story. However, curiosity's lure will surely make that first one for you – getting to know the mysterious stranger who is suddenly chatting you up. As you playfully yammer and volley memes back and forth, first on your computer and then on an actual date, something terrible is happening back at your apartment. When you return, you find a cryptic note pinned to your roommate's door. While you were out having fun, she has taken her own life. If only there was something you could have done.

The game ends on a downer, but this being a multiple choice narrative, naturally you begin again, to see what decisions you could have taken to –

potentially – save her life. Contrary to many branching games, *Missed Messages* remembers what you've done on previous playthroughs, with the hero rationalising their fragmented memories as

nightmarish, perhaps even prophetic dreams.

So, with your new knowledge in hand, you re-do the day to see what you can achieve. Do you ignore 'goth gf' and focus purely on your roommate? Or is there

a happy medium?

Rarely am I so determined to reverse an ending in a videogame, but I made it my mission to save my despairing roommate here. The act of doing so involved reams of authentically written dialogue. A lot of trying to be helpful, and of listening to May's story, rather than a single, easy dialogue option that

**You won't be able to relieve May's depression permanently**

## NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
A visual novel where you'll rewind time to fix a terrible mistake

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
Free

**DEVELOPER**  
Angela He

**PUBLISHER**  
In-house

**REVIEWED ON**  
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

**MULTIPLAYER**  
None

**LINK**  
[bit.ly/MissMess](http://bit.ly/MissMess)

magically switches off someone's suicidal thoughts.

## HOPE SPRINGS

You won't be able to relieve May's depression permanently, but you just might dispel it for a single night, and make things easier in the long run, and that feels true to life. *Missed Messages* contains some of the most direct, affecting dialogue I've encountered in a game.

We've become accustomed to the Telltale model of interactive adventure games, where a single choice can diverge a narrative down markedly differing paths. No one decision feels particularly momentous here. Instead, there seems to be an avalanche of small choices carrying you to one of the four endings, which feels subtler and, again, more like real life. Mental illness, I think, is one of gaming's favourite topics but few explore it at surface level, or with as much skill as in this lovely visual novel. ■

## PC GAMER VERDICT

Not as depressing as the subject matter might lead you to believe. A story of hope, and rekindled friendship.

**84**



## BOXING CLEVER

Getting pwned by cubes in **CIRKOBAN<sup>3</sup>**. By Tom Sykes

**G**iven its basic presentation, it's clear the majority of development time on game jam puzzler *Cirkoban<sup>3</sup>* was spent designing its nuts and bolts – the fairly intricate, tactile systems that make this puzzle game feel like a real puzzle box. At its core this resembles *Sokoban*. You'll manoeuvre blue blocks around, using them to push green ones attached to rigid power lines. Connect these lines from one end of a battery to another and you'll proceed to the next stage, of which there are, lamentably, only eight.

Where *Cirkoban<sup>3</sup>* differs from the majority of *Sokoban*-likes is its incorporation of the third dimension. Rather than a single, flat game board, there can be up to six in play here, as you hop from side to side of a 3D cube. Every side has its own blue, player block, which will spring into

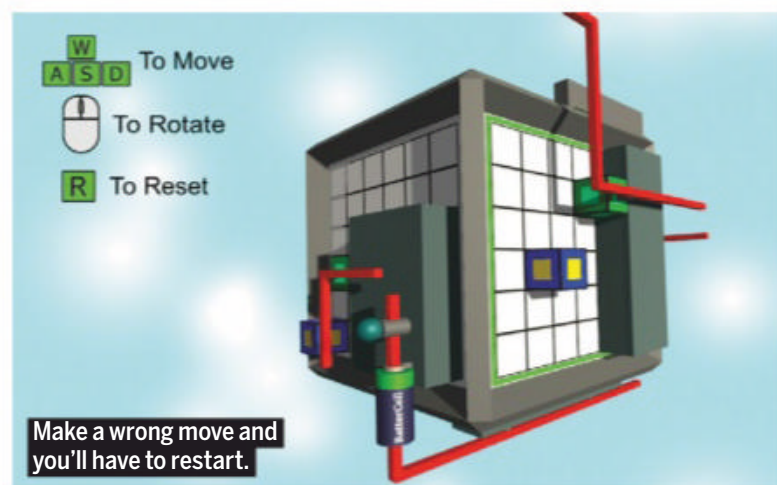
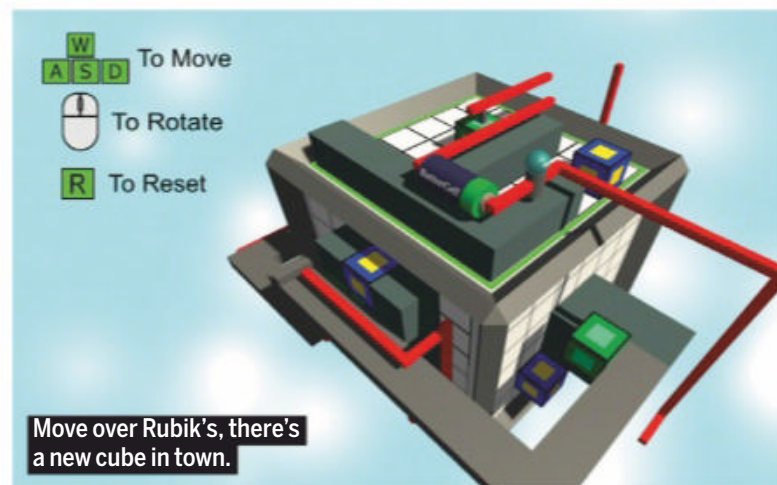
action when the player focuses on it, by swivelling the mouse. Pushable green blocks, meanwhile, are not just glued to power lines but to chunks of scaffolding, which curve around the edges of the cube.

As green blocks are often linked to one another, you may find that pushing one horizontally causes another to move vertically on an adjacent side. It's an inspired if awkward evolution of the block-pushing concept.

Despite containing only eight levels, *Cirkoban<sup>3</sup>* wrings a lot of tasty puzzling from its central concept. I was left with a big smile on my face after finally wrapping it up.

However, one addition to most modern puzzle games is notably absent. You can only redo an entire stage, not undo individual actions, resulting in plenty of frustrating do-overs. ■

64



### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
Free

DEVELOPER  
tykenn

LINK  
tykenn.itch.io

## NEXT OF KIN

Rewrite fate in **DEAR SUBSTANCE OF KIN**. By Tom Sykes

**O**ur fates, as we can all agree, are written on our palms, dictated by life lines and other creases that are definitely meaningful. *Dear Substance of Kin* imagines a world where our destinies are etched onto our backs, in invisible lines that only a wandering mystic can see. By getting a load of blood and scribbling out these destiny lines, a coppersmith may rewrite a person's fate.

You are a coppersmith, and it's not the best life to be honest. You seem to traipse from one destitute hamlet to another, offering your services to an assortment of miserable peasants. First you visit a hovel, then you engage its owners in conversation, seeking out the element of reality they would like to change. It might be a desire for food, or violence, or the power of flight. It's up to you to

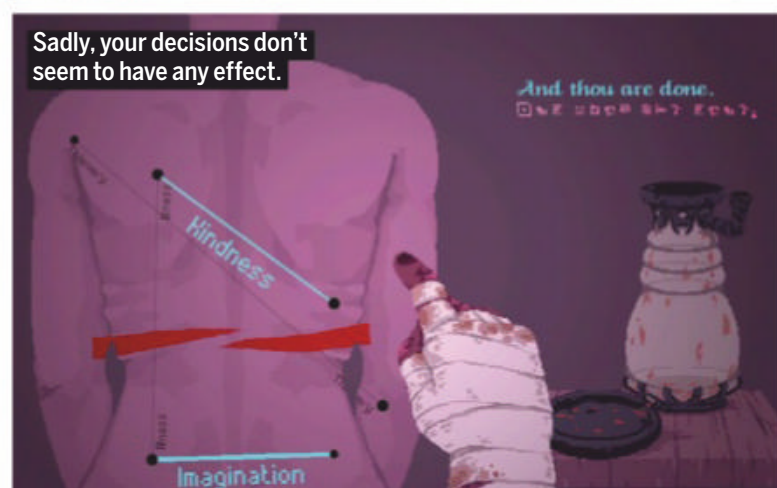
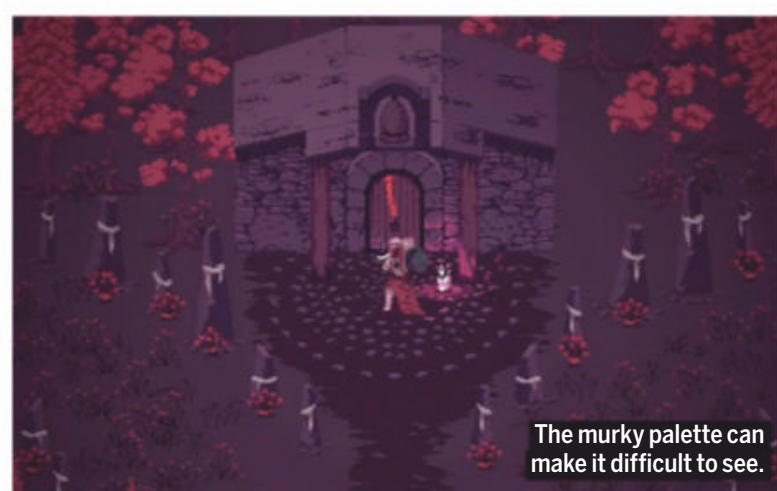
figure out how to achieve this, based on what they've said.

Magic requires sacrifice, and in order to enact it you'll need a sacrificial organ, which will then go into your icky gourd, as blood. You'll use this blood to scrub out one or more fate lines, before leaving to go and tend to someone else.

It's an excellent premise for a grim-dark fantasy story, realised with hurried but poetic dialogue and grungy pixel art. The evocative setting reveals just enough to intrigue – but without explaining how our actions will affect the world.

I would have appreciated an epilogue that explored the outcomes of all those difficult choices, as there's no return for your investment in your art. But this is an interesting world-building exercise that will briefly plunge you into a dark and engaging world. ■

68



### NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY  
Free

DEVELOPER  
Deconstructeam

LINK  
deconstructeam.itch.io



## THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



That thing behind me used to be a tank.



It's not animal cruelty if they're made of chainsaws.

# SEVER ISSUES

**METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE** will change how you chop vegetables

**I**t's Wednesday, it's raining, and you've just begun your guided tour of the Cumberland Pencil Museum. There are still 405 pencils left to view and you don't even like stationery. Then a cyborg ninja cartwheels through the gift shop, slices up all the pencils in a swirl of katana strikes, and you escape together on a motorbike to a more interesting museum. That's how exciting it is to play *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* for the first time.

I'm not exaggerating. For the rest of this review, I'm going to ask you to pretend it's written in capital letters with all the punctuation removed. I'm fighting a Metal Gear RAY within the first five minutes. Although 'fighting' isn't the right word. I'm knocking the shit out of it, hacking at its stupid legs and slicing up turrets like I'm making courgetti. I'd almost feel sorry for it if a) it was living thing and b) wasn't a threat to world peace.

It's like pulling the wings off a massive, nuclear-armed fly.

*MGRR* ticks some *Metal Gear Solid* boxes. You play as Raiden, everyone's least favourite protagonist. You can call people on a codec. The antagonists are part of a rogue private military contractor. But the level of economy and urgency here is absurd. I feel like Platinum has written the

entire plot of an *MGS* game onto a giant fist and is pummelling me with it. And here I am, smiling through broken teeth, screaming, "Punch me again, Inaba-san! I can take it."

I yank glowing spines out of baddies. I cut robot cows in half. I slice up waves of missiles before they can touch me. There's a ninja run button that lets me scale walls and reflect bullets, which begs the question why would I ever not want to press

**There's a  
ninja run  
button that  
lets me  
scale walls**

the ninja run button? That would be like me having a finger that dispenses dry Martinis but always wearing mittens. At one point Raiden hops across rockets to the sound of WWE entrance music, while I grin like a dog with its head out the window of a moving car. Has anyone else played this? Am I dreaming? Is this what love feels like? *MGRR* is five years

### NEED TO KNOW

**WHAT IS IT?**  
Frenetic Platinum action game that will give watermelons nightmares

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£20

**DEVELOPER**  
PlatinumGames

**PUBLISHER**  
Konami

**REVIEWED ON**  
Intel Core i7-7700 CUP  
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,  
NVIDIA GeForce GTX  
1070, Windows 10

**MULTIPLAYER**  
No  
**LINK**  
[www.konami.com/mg/archive/mgr](http://www.konami.com/mg/archive/mgr)

old, and everything I've played since feels like a toddler's racing ride at a crumbling theme park.

### NANOMACHINES, SON

In my excitement I will admit that the game has taught me literally nothing. I either haven't been paying attention, or Platinum has assumed that I've taken the time to play all the training missions, which I absolutely haven't. This is especially clear when I get to the first proper boss, a smug cyborg wolf with a chainsaw attached to its tail. It's a tricky fight, but my biggest enemy is visibility. The camera isn't just bad – it belongs in a prison for the criminally useless. But I don't think I've ever been more willing to forgive a game for making life difficult for me. In those moments of direct control, *MGRR* is wonderful, exhilarating nonsense, and I'm tempted to make the other four reviews on this page about it just in case my excitement isn't abundantly clear. ■

### PC GAMER VERDICT

If you've ever enjoyed slicing anything up, ever, then you need to play this game.

**88**



# TOFF LOVE

## The power of tweed in **SIR, YOU ARE BEING HUNTED**

**T**he character select screen is enough to let me know I'll love this game. The choices in *Sir, You are Being Hunted* resemble the finale in a middling episode of *Poirot*. My options include a gamekeeper, a cook, a military officer, and a dipsomaniac. I'm tempted to pick the officer because they come equipped with a revolver and commemorative royalist crockery, but that seems a bit OP. I go for the default option of aristocrat instead.

The goal is to collect mysterious fragments scattered across a procedurally-generated archipelago and bring them back to the equally-mysterious henge (is there another kind?). It's rather nice to begin with, the birds are tweeting as I stamp through a copse in search of blackberries and I can practically feel the dew on my tweeds. But my gentle

enjoyment of nature is shattered when I notice my first enemy – essentially a robot version of haunted trombone Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg. He pursues me as he would a hard Brexit or women's reproductive rights, but I escape by heroically cowering in a thicket.

I start looting houses in the wonderfully-named villages. Now armed with a revolver and a haggis, the hunters become the hunted.

I've got plenty of food, but I now have crooked landowners and robot dogs after me, and I'm running low on ammo. I'm also struggling to find fragments, so end up doing increasingly stressful laps around the island. I decide to take what I've got back to my henge and get mauled by a mechanical Labrador moments before I can drop off my stuff. The nightmares will be worth it – I'll definitely play this again. ■

72



### NEED TO KNOW

**EXPECT TO PAY**  
£15

**DEVELOPER**  
Big Robot Ltd

**PUBLISHER**  
Big Robot Ltd



## ICONOCLASTS

**R**emaining with the same loose theme of 'things that have bolts', next we have *Iconoclasts*. It's a slightly wordy name for what might be one of the prettiest pixelated games I've ever seen. It's milkshake for the eyes. Even death is cute: colourful little skulls float away whenever I shoot the wildlife.

It's the sort of game that I think all games used to look like growing up. And systemically, it's a dream – gentle Metroidvania progression that doesn't feel too back-and-forthy, alongside some elegantly timed puzzles that make me feel delightfully effective. Even the threatening theological police state storyline can't dent my childlike enjoyment of this. ■

82



## BINARY DOMAIN

**B**inary Domain is the sort of game that inspires 7/10 list features (that's list features about average games, not average list features). The characters, apart from the chipper French robot, are uniformly bland. It's so much fun shooting robots with machine guns that it just doesn't matter. It's a masterclass in how an obviously flawed game can capture your heart. Like a dog with a fat ear, those minor imperfections just give it more character. If you've ever wondered how a game can score 75 per cent and still be incredible, simply play *Binary Domain*. And if you've already played it and understand why it's so wonderful, go ahead and add 10 points to that score. ■

75



## OPUS MAGNUM

**O**pus Magnum, also known as 'that game you always see on Twitter that makes no sense until you play it', is an alchemical puzzle game included here because of the vaguely mechanical looking arms. It's the sort of game that makes me feel clever and stupid in equal measure. Solving a conundrum is brilliant right up until the point I see how smarter, more efficient minds have circumvented the same problem. But that sense of being able to muddle through is still incredibly satisfying. ■

90



# TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.



**PRESS PAUSE**  
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT

To find out more about Press Pause, visit:  
**[pauseyourday.co.uk](http://pauseyourday.co.uk)**



# HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



**102**

## VALVE INDEX REVIEW

We've tested Valve's pricey new headset. Is it the next step in the VR revolution?



**104**

## BUYER'S GUIDE

Get the best PC parts for your build, no matter your budget.









## GROUP TEST

## GRAPHICS CARDS

Find the best graphics card without bankrupting the rest of your PC build.

By Alan Bradley

**F**inding the best graphics card for you depends on how you plan to use it. Chances are that since you're reading this guide in PC Gamer, you're in the market for the best graphics card for gaming, and these are hands down the best parts for our favourite hobby. The best gaming PCs will almost always prioritize the GPU over the best CPU for gaming because gaming workloads prioritize the kind of single threaded processing at which graphics cards excel, but if you run a lot of applications simultaneously or your workload (rendering, encoding, etc) leans on multithreaded processing, you may want to consider budgeting a little more for your CPU. Of course, you can automatically pad out your budget by getting your graphics card on sale, so keep your eyes on our Amazon Prime Day PC deals hub online for the best

prices on GPUs and everything else under the PC gaming sun this month.

So with your workload in mind, which graphics card best suits your needs? For 1440p Ultra and 4K Ultra gaming at reasonable frame rates, you're going to need a really mighty card, like a high end RTX such as the 2080 or 2080 Ti. On the other side of the spectrum, if you're happy with 1080p or shopping on a budget, consider a card like AMD's RX 570, which does an excellent job of pushing FHD and slightly outperforms Nvidia's 1060 for roughly the same price. Between them, cards like the RTX 2060 or Nvidia's GeForce GTX 1660 offer solid QHD performance without paying a punishing premium.

Regardless of which part you pick, pair it with the best gaming mouse and best gaming keyboard to ensure you're getting the best in-game performance out of your new hardware.

2

## GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

NVIDIA £1,130

The fastest card for 4K, ray tracing, and more

**1** Nvidia's GeForce RTX 2080 Ti is the latest and most potent GPU around, and it's also one of the largest consumer GPUs ever produced. The Turing TU102 is 60 per cent larger than the Pascal GP102 in the 1080 Ti, with 55 per cent more transistors. Those extra transistors went into more CUDA cores, but Nvidia didn't stop there, adding in Tensor cores to help accelerate deep learning algorithms like DLSS, plus RT cores to accelerate ray tracing.

There are plenty of other enhancements in the Turing architecture as well, but if you want the best, be prepared to

shell out. Technically there's also the Titan RTX, which more than doubles the price of the 2080 Ti, but it's more of a prosumer card that anything we'd recommend for pure gaming purposes.

If you're looking for the best value, forget about the new RTX cards. On the other hand, if you're eyeing a 4k 144Hz HDR G-Sync display and you want the absolute fastest graphics card around, this is the card for you.

## PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Fastest graphics card around
- ➕ Ray tracing and deep learning tech
- ➖ Few ray tracing games
- ➖ Extravagantly priced

**SPECS** GPU CORES: 4,352 / BASE CLOCK: 1,350MHz / BOOST CLOCK: 1,545MHz / GFLOPS: 13,448 / MEMORY: 11GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 14 GT/s / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 616GB/s

## GeForce RTX 2080

NVIDIA £720

The second fastest GPU at a more reasonable price

**2** Sure, the RTX 2080 Ti is the fastest graphics card and has all sorts of cool and potentially useful features, but at the current prices it's a tough pill to swallow. Dropping down to the RTX 2080 will get you still excellent performance and save some cash. And you still get the same ray tracing and deep learning (eg, DLSS) features, albeit not quite as many of each core type.

The one major caveat right now is the same as before, we're still waiting for more games that enable ray tracing effects and DLSS. We've got *Battlefield 5*, *Metro Exodus*, *Shadow of the*

*Tomb Raider*, and, you know, *Quake 2* (with unreleased games like *Cyberpunk 2077* and the *Call of Duty* reboot recently climbing on the bandwagon). The RTX 2080 can run all of those games with ray tracing... but not at maximum quality and certainly not at 4K and 60fps. Even with an expensive GPU, 1440p typically works best at slightly reduced ray tracing quality mode and with DLSS enabled.

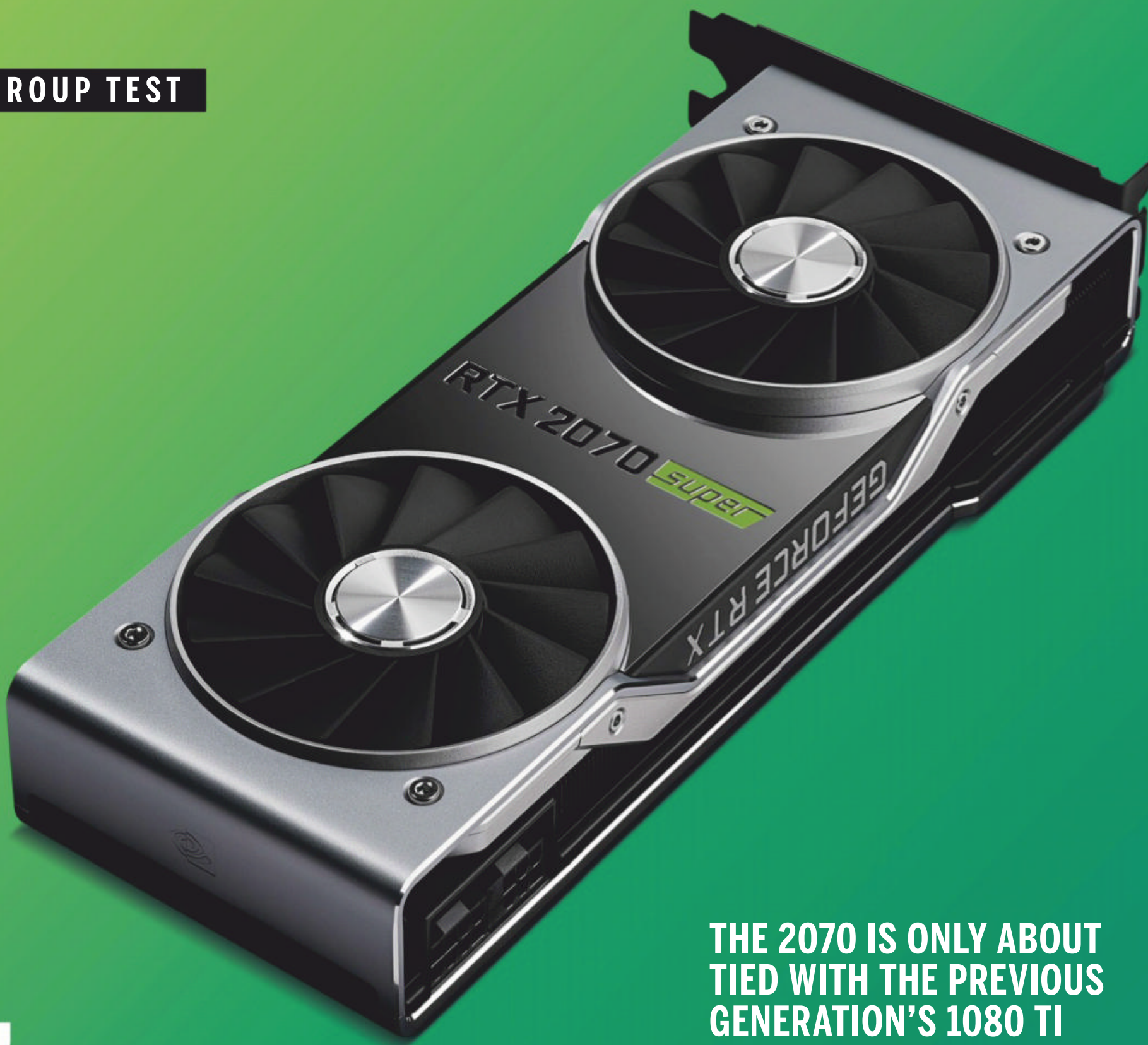
## PC GAMER VERDICT

- ➕ Ray tracing and deep learning
- ➕ Potential to become even faster
- ➖ 1440p ray tracing needs DLSS
- ➖ More expensive than the 1080 Ti

**SPECS** GPU CORES: 2,944 / BASE CLOCK: 1,515MHz / BOOST CLOCK: 1,710MHz / GFLOPS: 10,068 / MEMORY: 8GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 14 GT/s / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 448GB/s



## GROUP TEST



THE 2070 IS ONLY ABOUT  
TIED WITH THE PREVIOUS  
GENERATION'S 1080 Ti

### GeForce RTX 2070 Super

NVIDIA £500

The best card for mid-range RTX performance

**3** The ray tracing future may sound great, but what if you can't afford £700 or more on a graphics card? That's where Nvidia's RTX 2070 Super enters the picture, the middle option of the new lineup (with the 2080 Super launching late-July). The 2070 Super retails at £500, the same price as the vanilla 2070 at launch, and offers a substantial performance improvement. That's still a lot of money for a graphics card, and the 2070 is only about tied with the previous generation's 1080 Ti, at least in games that don't support DLSS – which is still most games.

The RTX 2070 Super moves to the TU104 chip from the base version's TU106, enables more cores, and increases clockspeeds. The performance bump is pretty predictable but also very welcome when it doesn't come with an increase in price. As a play to stay ahead of AMD's RX 5700 and 5700 XT launch, it's very convincing, though as a new product stack it's not earth-shaking.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Performance close to a 2080
- Same starting price as base 2070
- Handles 4K at high/medium
- A very iterative release

**SPECS** GPU CORES: 2,560 / BASE CLOCK: 1,605MHZ / BOOST CLOCK: 1,770MHZ / GFLOPS: 9,062 / MEMORY: 8GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 14 GT/S / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 448GB/S

### GeForce RTX 2060 Super

NVIDIA £430

The best card for 1440p, 144Hz performance

**4** The best graphics card isn't simply the fastest graphics card, or the cheapest graphics card. Instead, the best graphics card needs to balance performance, price, and features into one irresistible package. There are many great graphics cards, but for a great GPU that won't break the bank, Nvidia's RTX 2060 Super is probably the best option. It delivers performance roughly equal to a vanilla RTX 2070 but is available for less.

If you want to play games at 1080p or 1440p on a 144Hz display, the RTX 2060 has the chops to handle most games at

close to high to ultra quality. It's more powerful than a 1080 but costs less, and is nearly twice as fast as an RX 570.

For DXR and ray tracing games, 1080p with DLSS often works well, and in a few cases 1440p with DLSS. Don't be shy about turning the ray tracing setting down a notch as well, as in most games so far there's not much visual difference between ultra and high quality DXR modes.

#### PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great for 1080p and 1440p gaming
- Affordably priced RTX features
- Replaces the 2070, for less
- Extremely iterative

**SPECS** GPU CORES: 2,176 / BASE CLOCK: 1,470MHZ / BOOST CLOCK: 1,650MHZ / GFLOPS: 7,181 / MEMORY: 8GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 14 GT/S / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 448GB/S





## SHOULD YOU UPGRADE?

If you're doubtful that your current PC is fast enough to warrant purchasing a better graphics card, I have some data for you. Even with the fastest graphics card around, running at a resolution that puts more of the burden on your CPU (1080p ultra), there's often only a minor improvement in gaming performance. Yes, truly old CPUs are going to struggle, but going from a Core i7-4770K to a Core i7-8700K only improves gaming performance by 20 per cent on average, at 1080p ultra.

What happens if you use a graphics card that's 20-30 per cent slower than an RTX 2080? Your CPU becomes even less of a factor. If you have at least 8GB of system memory and a Core i7-4770K or better CPU, you should be fine with everything up to about the GTX 1070 Ti / RX Vega 56 level of performance. We wouldn't recommend buying an i7-4770K these days, however, so when it comes time to upgrade look at our choice for the best CPU for gaming.

Don't be fooled into thinking VRAM capacity is more important than the GPU, either. It can be a factor, but slower GPUs with 4GB VRAM usually can't handle settings that actually need 4GB VRAM, and games that need 8GB will also tend to favor GPUs closer to the RTX 2080 than the RX 580. There's also very little (if any) discernible difference in most games when switching from 2GB to 4GB textures, never mind 4GB to 8GB.



## Radeon RX 5700

AMD £350

The best card for reasonably priced performance

**5** The launch of the 5000-series of cards is a landmark moment for AMD, which has been struggling to find its footing in the graphics card market in the face of Nvidia's dominance. While their previous RX cards have been aggressively priced and allowed AMD to maintain a foothold in the budget space, the mid and high-tier range has been all Green Team for the past generation plus.

The 5700 and 5700 XT radically change that dynamic. In them, AMD has a card with the price and performance to genuinely challenge Nvidia's RTX offerings (including the new

Super launch), not in small part due to the last second price cut AMD announced before launch. At £350, with performance exceeding the vanilla 2060 by 10% or more, the 5700 is excellent value even in the face of Nvidia's Super counterpunch.

While the 5700 may lack marquee features like ray tracing or DLSS support, in terms of base performance at this price point, it's currently head of the class.

### PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Great performance at FHD and QHD
- + Uses less power than the 5700 XT
- Lacks ray tracing support
- No marquee feature

**SPECS** GPU CORES: 2,304 / BASE CLOCK: 1,465MHz / BOOST CLOCK: 1,725MHz / GFLOPS: 7,949 / MEMORY: 8GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 14 GT/s / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 448GB/s

## Radeon RX 5700 XT

AMD £450

The best card for those who crave AMD's finest

**6** After a bevy of leaks, gossip, and rampant speculation, Radeon's Navi 10 GPU is finally out in the wild, with three RX 5700 models leading the charge. The 5700 XT is technically the middle offering, between the base 5700 and the 5700 XT 50th Anniversary Edition, and takes full advantage of the shiny new RDNA architecture update and a capacious 8GB of GDDR6 to deliver performance just ahead of Nvidia's 2060 Super.

The 5700 XT is a fantastic card if you're looking to push really high frame rates on a high refresh display at 1080p, or you

crave a stable 60(ish) FPS at QHD. It's an extremely viable alternative to Nvidia's 2060.

It may lack dedicated hardware (or driver support) for ray tracing and DLSS, but in terms of sheer in-game performance, it edges out the 2060 Super by a narrow margin. The 5700 XT is an easy recommend—especially if you're upgrading from a card that's a couple of generations old.

### PC GAMER VERDICT

- + Efficient new RDNA architecture
- + Great 1440p performance
- No ray tracing hardware
- Runs a bit hot

**SPECS** GPU CORES: 2,560 / BASE CLOCK: 1,605MHz / BOOST CLOCK: 1,905MHz / GFLOPS: 9,754 / MEMORY: 8GB GDDR6 / MEMORY CLOCK: 14 GT/s / MEMORY BANDWIDTH: 448GB/s





## REVIEW

## VALVE INDEX

High-end VR with a luxury price.

By Bo Moore

**T**here's no denying that the Valve Index is a great VR headset. At present, it's the best VR headset on the market, with best-in-class display resolution and refresh rate. But it's also the most expensive – and at times more frustrating – than other headsets (namely the Oculus Rift S) that offer a similar experience.

Let's start with what the Index does well. The Index display boasts a

1440x1600 per-eye resolution and refresh rate of 120 Hz, which together offer the best visual experience I've had in VR to date. (For comparison the Rift S offers 1280x1440 resolution per eye at 80 Hz.) The 'screen-door' effect that plagued first-generation VR headsets is practically nonexistent. There's also a dial and slider for lens adjustment, helping you get the placement just right for maximum comfort and FOV.

Speaking of comfort, the Index also feels great to wear. It's a bit heavier than the Rift S – enough that the weight is

**MAIN:** Valve's new VR headset. Is the full kit £919 well spent?

noticeable in a side-by-side comparison – but the shape of the head strap better distributes that weight around your head. The strap materials feel quality too – more like a padded extra-soft t-shirt than standard foam padding – and never bothered me during extended play sessions. But most importantly, the Index is comfortable because of how it delivers audio.

The Index has built-in near-field speakers that hover just next to your ears, not actually on them, powered by speaker drivers instead of the ones usually found in headphones. What this means is the Index's speakers offer outstanding three-dimensional surround sound without shutting yourself off to external noises. And with zero pressure on your ears, there's less fatigue from staying in VR for an extended period of time.

The other hallmark feature of the Index is its new controllers that double as both typical motion controllers and hand/finger trackers. The Index controllers strap to your hands – meaning you can release your grip without worrying about dropping them. Where previous touch controllers could only articulate grip, the Index controllers let me give a thumbs-up, do finger guns, or even offer a Vulcan salute.

Finger tracking is one of the distinguishing features of the Index, but there aren't many impressive implementations yet. The best use so far is Valve's *Aperture Hand Labs* tech demo,

**SPECS** RESOLUTION: 1440X1600 (PER EYE) / DISPLAY REFRESH RATE: 120 HZ (WITH 144 HZ MODE) / FOV: ~130 DEGREES / AUDIO: 37.5MM OFF-EAR SPEAKERS, BUILT-IN MICROPHONE / TRACKING: STEAMVR 2.0 SENSORS (COMPATIBLE WITH STEAMVR 1.0 BASE STATIONS)



**RIGHT:** The Index controllers are, Valve says, designed for comfort and fidelity.

**BELOW:** The Index's in-built speakers are designed to not touch your ears.



**LEFT TOP:** The Index is designed for a high resolution and refresh rate.

**LEFT BOTTOM:** The lenses offer a higher field-of-view than the HTC Vive.



which has you waving to, high-fiving, and playing rock-paper-scissors with a collection of quirky *Portal*-style robots. The brief experience has all the charm of other *Portal* games, but the finger tracking felt more like a proof of concept than a gameplay innovation.

Outside of Aperture's labs I found the finger tracking all but unnecessary. Games like *Vacation Simulator* and *Arizona Sunshine* have released updates to implement finger tracking, but the experience after playing both with and without the update was nearly identical. The action you use most often in current VR games with touch controls is grip – that is, picking up and dropping objects – and that's already simulated just fine with regular triggers.

I might feel differently about the finger tracking if more games used it right now, but if all you're doing is gripping and aiming, having individual finger articulation really doesn't make much of a difference. It's the sort of tech that will rely on cool implementations to make it worth pursuing – not just slightly enhanced gripping mechanics,

but situations that truly take advantage (without feeling like a gimmick) of individual finger tracking.

## SETTING UP

The Index is also frustrating in a lot of ways that have become ever more glaring after using the inside-out tracking of the Oculus Rift S. The Index is a roomscale VR experience, which means it requires two base station sensors positioned around your play area. This is nothing new, of course – the HTC Vive and Vive Pro, as well as the last-gen Oculus Touch controllers, all use base stations to track your headset and controllers in

## OUTSIDE OF APERTURE'S LABS I FOUND THE FINGER TRACKING ALL BUT UNNECESSARY

3D space. What's changed is the competition. The new Rift S, as well as the just-announced Vive Cosmos, use inside-out tracking – that is, sensors on the headset instead of placed around your room. After growing accustomed to that more streamlined experience, setting up sensors around the room for the Index was frustrating.

Even after you have your base stations in place, the roomscale setup is also a pain. With the Rift S, the headset's cameras give you digital view of your surroundings wherein you simply draw your play area on the ground. It only takes a

few seconds, which is nice if you've moved furniture around or accumulated some floor clutter since the last time you stepped into VR. The Index's setup has to be done via Steam on your computer, before you put the headset on. After calculating floor height, you click the trigger at four corners of your available space, which Steam then measures in order to determine your best play area. After using the Rift S, it just feels old-fashioned – like having to start your car with a crank before sitting down and driving.

The Index is a fantastic pile of tech and the most luxurious VR experience available. And it does look and feel better than the Rift S, but not by much. For twice the price, I want something that delivers an experience leaps and bounds ahead of the rest. ■

**PC GAMER**

**VERDICT**

- + Finger-tracking controllers
- + Best-in-class display
- Few finger-tracking games
- Steep price tag

**79**



YOUR NEXT PC

# BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



## KEY

### *Budget build*

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

### *Mid-range build*

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

### *Advanced build*

You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.



# BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



**TOTAL**  
**£1,061**

|               |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>B360M-DS3H</b><br>Gigabyte <b>£60</b><br>It lacks overclocking options, but the new B360 chipset is far cheaper than the Z370 and is perfect for this budget build.              |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i3-8100</b><br>Intel <b>£120</b><br>A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.                        |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 2060 Ventus 6G OC</b><br>MSI <b>£320</b><br>MSI's budget take on the RTX 2060 is lightning fast for the money, offering out-of-the-box overclocked values.           |
| COOLER        |   | <b>Hyper 212 Evo</b><br>CoolerMaster <b>£26</b><br>Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.                              |
| MEMORY        |  | <b>Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x4GB) @2400MHz</b><br>Corsair <b>£48</b><br>DDR4 prices are still high, however this Corsair pair is a good value option.                                    |
| POWER SUPPLY  |  | <b>CX-M Series CX550M</b><br>Corsair <b>£58</b><br>A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.                                    |
| SSD           |  | <b>MX500 250GB</b><br>Crucial <b>£38</b><br>Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.         |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM</b><br>Western Digital <b>£38</b><br>One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games. |
| CASE          |  | <b>Neos</b><br>Bitfenix <b>£34</b><br>The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.                              |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>G2460PF</b><br>AOC <b>£200</b><br>This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.               |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>Alloy FPS Pro</b><br>HyperX <b>£70</b><br>A reliable and attractive board with no added frills from HyperX – plus it'll match that Stinger Core headset. Result.                 |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>Rival 110</b><br>SteelSeries <b>£20</b><br>A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.                                  |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>Cloud Stinger</b><br>HyperX <b>£29</b><br>We love the HyperX Cloud, but at £70 it's too much for an entry-level system. The Cloud Stinger is the next best thing.                |

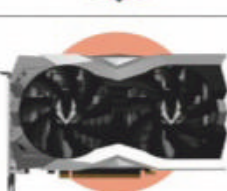


# MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



**TOTAL**  
**£1,556**

|               |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MOTHERBOARD   |    | <b>Prime Z370 A II</b><br>Aus <b>£153</b><br>Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.                           |
| PROCESSOR     |    | <b>Core i5-8600K</b><br>Intel <b>£231</b><br>Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.              |
| GRAPHICS CARD |    | <b>GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan</b><br>Zotac <b>£320</b><br>Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.                       |
| COOLER        |   | <b>Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition</b><br>Corsair <b>£55</b><br>Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so. |
| MEMORY        |  | <b>Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666</b><br>Corsair <b>£69</b><br>16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.                                              |
| POWER SUPPLY  |  | <b>CX 650W</b><br>Corsair <b>£60</b><br>It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.                      |
| SSD           |  | <b>MX500 250GB</b><br>Crucial <b>£38</b><br>This is still our SSD of choice. We've kept the capacity the same as our cheaper build, but upgrading to 500GB would be ideal.                   |
| HDD           |  | <b>WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM</b><br>Western Digital <b>£75</b><br>SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.                         |
| CASE          |  | <b>Eclipse P400S TG</b><br>Phanteks <b>£269</b><br>The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.                        |
| DISPLAY       |  | <b>Optix MAG271CR</b><br>MSI <b>£108</b><br>Curved, stylish, and offering 144Hz refresh rates, our MSI monitor pick suits pros and would-be pros alike.                                      |
| KEYBOARD      |  | <b>One</b><br>Ducky <b>£60</b><br>A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the One.                                       |
| MOUSE         |  | <b>G502 Proteus Spectrum</b><br>Logitech <b>£00</b><br>Logitech's revered G502 is comfortable, adjustable, and precise. Also 'Proteus Spectrum' sounds like a <i>Halo</i> map.               |
| HEADSET       |  | <b>HyperX Cloud</b><br>Kingston <b>£80</b><br>Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.                                              |



# ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



**TOTAL**  
**£3,876**

MOTHERBOARD



## Strix X470-F Gaming

Asus **£185**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR



## Ryzen 7 2700X

AMD **£269**

Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

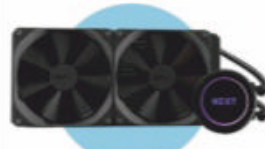


## GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition

EVGA **£1,018**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER



## Kraken X62

NZXT **£130**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



## Ripjaws V 32GB @3200

G.Skill **£172**

G.Skill is always a safe bet for lightning fast RAM, and if you can do without the RGB frills this 2x16GB set will treat you right.

POWER SUPPLY



## HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£150**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



## 970 Evo 500GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **£100**

Samsung's newest NVMe SSDs push performance to new heights and cost the same as the previous 960 range.

HDD



## WD Blue 4TB

Western Digital **£99**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE



## Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **£180**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



## AW3418DW

Alienware **£998**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD



## K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£115**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



## G502 Lightspeed

Logitech **£130**

The Lightspeed is the very latest edition of Logi's loveable G502, and while it might look familiar nearly all internal parts are new.

HEADSET



## GSP 670

Sennheiser **£330**

Sennheiser's first wireless gaming headset shoots for audiophile territory with great control placement and 16 hours of battery.



# EXTRA+LIFE

## CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

How do your time powers work? No idea, don't care.



## “Well, I’ve just finished my first date and what can I say? Love is blind”

Finally going all the way with **QUANTUM BREAK**

**T**his, my first encounter with *Quantum Break*, had the odd anticipation of a first date. I’ve annoyed my friends with it for ages – what if I don’t like it? With heightening anxiety, I realised that their opinions were just making it worse. They have different impressions. The only way to find out was to actually commit and see for myself. So I invite it over and spend the length of a rom-com montage getting ready while watching the progress bar of a seemingly endless download. Then it’s time.

Sometimes starting a new game can be oddly nerve wracking. Wanting to give a game the attention it deserves

### MALINDY HETFELD



**THIS MONTH**  
Came as close to becoming a modern Jedi as possible.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
Beyonce’s *Homecoming* on repeat

– to truly dive headfirst into an experience without getting distracted – can be tricky when there’s so much stuff vying for your attention. That’s the best explanation I have for why I never played *Quantum Break* before. I wanted it to have my full attention, and I was already filled to the brim with everyone else’s opinions and expectations. Well, I’ve just finished my first date and what can I say? Love is blind.

*Quantum Break* is very camp. It has people shouting “noooo!!” before something terrible happens, things frequently fall from great heights and every meeting between characters has the tension of a potential standoff. It’s the very essence of schlocky videogame entertainment, pressed into the narrative conventions of television. My early 2000s self squeaks at Shawn Ashmore, all grown-up, before acknowledging Dominic Monaghan with the same teenage reverence.

### MY EARLY 2000S SELF SQUEAKS AT SHAWN ASHMORE, ALL GROWN-UP





Yes, everyone who's already said it was right – the live-action sequences don't add anything meaningful to the overall experience, especially in a game that already has its fair share of cutscenes. Instead, I await the next opportunity to shoot at things.

I've never been a person to describe shooting in games as something that feels good, but in *Quantum Break*, it does. I know for people who regularly play shooters this isn't much of a challenge, but I enjoy the needless zooming around and catching of bullets, and the way the very last enemy goes down in slow motion after each shootout.

## BREAKING TIME

This is the first game in a long time that made me aware of controller vibration to the point it seriously enhanced the experience. A lot of what you can do in *Quantum Break* seems to simply exist because it's cool, as if someone literally said "here's something else you can do with your power", like those vague platforming sequences in which I slow and rewind time.

I don't even play Remedy games for the narrative, more for the feeling, and the atmosphere they exude. *Alan Wake* gave me nightmares just with people warbling words backwards and jumping at me from the dark. *Quantum Break* offers time travel technobabble with a side helping of brilliant dialogue such as "the time egg is fucked". What's not to like? ■



# "I'm still using the default loadout"

An unplanned return to **TEAM FORTRESS 2**

▶ PHIL SAVAGE



**THIS MONTH**  
Made an inadvisable purchase.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Destiny 2, Dusk*

**I** load up *TF2* not with any serious intention of playing it. I'm here simply because I'm trying to figure out Steam's bizarre Grand Prix sale event. Apparently if I play some casual matches I can earn points that do... something? I don't know.

On the menu screen I notice a new button for something called the ConTracker. It seems to be a bounty system offering rewards for completing basic missions – kill, capture, defend, etc. It's all locked behind the Jungle Inferno Contracts Pass. On a whim, I buy it. I've been here less than five minutes and I'm already £1.89 down.

I queue up for a casual Payload game and load into Badwater Basin. It's on the loading screen that the nostalgia hits. The long bar denoting the many hours I've played as Scout. The other long bar that stands as testament to a particularly notable kill streak as Spy on an unofficial server that nobody was taking very seriously. It's been a couple of years since I last played it, but I'm back!

My team starts on defence. After some trouble relearning how to effectively play Soldier or Demoman, I switch to Medic and it all clicks back into place. Unconsciously I position myself in such a way as to heal my Heavy without exposing myself to danger, years of learned behaviour helping ensure I'm an effective teammate.

A friendly Sniper emerges from a nearby building. Wait, isn't that a route frequented by Spies? A couple of thwacks with the Übersaw confirm that yes, yes it is.

We win the round and switch to attack. I've probably now done whatever I was supposed to do to earn Grand Prix points, but you know what? This is more fun. I swap to Scout and try to flank the defending team while they're focused on the rest of my team. I take down a Sniper before a sentry finishes me off. This is the good stuff.

## KEEPING UP APPEARANCES

I think a lot of people assume that all the new weapons and modes and hats have slowly turned *TF2* into an impenetrable, chaotic mess. I'm not sure that's entirely accurate. With a couple of key exceptions tweaked for preference I'm still using the default loadout for every class, and never got the sense that I was at a disadvantage. Sure, sometimes the Pyros shoot energy beams now, but they still die to a surprise Scattergun blast in the back. ■





Don't forget to check out the backroads too.



This could be a shot from Chernobyl.



# “Even the licence plates on my truck are accurate to the region”

## Heading for Russia in **EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2**

**W**hen I finished HBO's brilliant Chernobyl miniseries, I found myself missing its muted, desaturated Soviet misery. So I thought about what games I could play to fill the gap. One of the *STALKER* games, maybe? They certainly have the aesthetic, and are literally set in and around Chernobyl. But, honestly, they're too exciting. *DayZ* is set in a fictional Eastern Bloc country, Chernarus, that is steeped in a similar atmosphere. But I gave up on that game long ago.

I wanted something more realistic, more subdued. Something that captured the compellingly bleak, dreary mood of the series. And then I remembered that I hadn't played *Euro Truck Simulator 2*'s new Beyond the Baltic Sea expansion yet, which adds Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, southern Finland, and parts of western Russia to the already massive trucking simulator.

I start a new trucking company based in St Petersburg and I'm immediately struck by how different this part of the world feels. Developer SCS is getting really good at making each expansion feel unique, which

### ▶ **ANDY KELLY**



**THIS MONTH**  
Travelled beyond the Baltic Sea.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Heavy Rain*

makes cross-country road trips much more exciting. I see apartment blocks with Soviet-era architecture, Russian Orthodox churches, and adverts and road signs printed in Cyrillic. Even the licence plates on my truck are accurate to the region.

As I make deliveries around the region I see a row of monolithic high-rises painted in bright colours, a church on a secluded road silhouetted against a purple evening sky, and industrial complexes sprawling across the countryside. It's remarkable how atmospheric *Euro Truck Simulator 2* can be, and how vivid a sense of place it can create. To really capture that stereotypical late

## **IT'S REMARKABLE HOW ATMOSPHERIC EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2 CAN BE**

1980s Soviet feel, I make sure I have rain probability set to max. Overcast skies just feel right here.

Beyond the Baltic Sea might not feature anything quite as dramatic as the Scandinavia expansion's sheer mountain roads, or the lush coastal highways of the Italy expansion, but there's a quiet, understated beauty to it. I've also noticed some new random road events, which are normally mundane occurrences, but in this instance was a Russian fighter jet that had fallen off a truck and rolled onto the road.

### **SCRATCHING THE ITCH**

Beyond the Baltic Sea is another great expansion, but with the usual caveat that these DLC packs don't change the game in any meaningful way. It's just more places to drive.

A trucking simulator might seem like a weird way to scratch the itch of missing a gritty TV series. There are plenty of games that use or pay homage to the Soviet aesthetic, whether it's weird time-bending FPS *Singularity*, strategy game *World in Conflict*, or punishing point-and-click adventure *KGB*. But only *Euro Truck Simulator 2* manages to capture it in the same mundane, matter-of-fact way as the show. ■



# “If the game wants me to fall asleep at the wheel, I’m not going to fight it”

Crossing China at no more than 30mph in **ROAD TO GUANGDONG**

**T**he sun sinks behind the high rises of Foshan, sending long shadows in block formation across the highway. A lovely lavender light bathes the dash of my ancient Shanghai SH760. After about a minute, the light starts blinking. And then the engine cuts out. What I’d taken as part of the ambience might, in retrospect, have been a mechanical warning.

It’s 32 kilometres to the nearest garage. And many more to the farm in Shenzhen, my destination. Luckily, a cursory examination of the car reveals I’ve run out of fuel. I switch to the outside view, pull open the cap, and pour a can of petrol into the engine. Not all of it – just enough to get me to the garage, where I can fill up. Road disasters like these are common in *Road to Guangdong*, and I’ll need the can again.

This is a road trip game, part of a new genre that takes *Euro Truck Simulator* and strips it for parts – leaving just you, your vehicle, and the journey ahead. It taps into the strange serenity of long, boring drives, and the grounding connection of constant

## JEREMY PEEL



**THIS MONTH**  
Found a replacement engine in a garbage pile behind the garage.

**ALSO PLAYED**  
*Far Cry 2*

maintenance. Next to the fuel gauge on the dash is another to measure oil, which must be topped up to avoid engine damage. A third meter accounts for temperature, which will spike if the fan belt is loose. And a fourth – well, I don’t know what the fourth gauge is for because it’s missing, the fitting opening onto exposed wires. The SH760 is an old car – old enough to have a name, Sandy, and family history to rival that of your passenger, Aunt Guu Ma.

The aunt is almost as cantankerous as the vehicle, chastising protagonist Sunny over her taste for adventure.

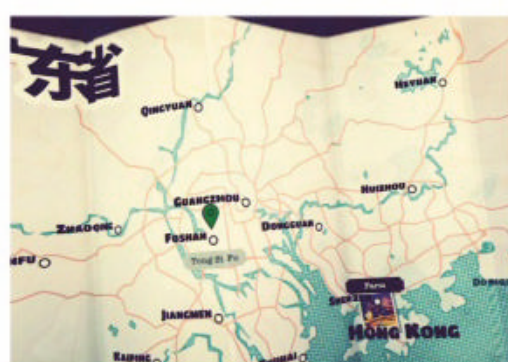
## I DON’T KNOW WHAT THE FOURTH GAUGE IS FOR BECAUSE IT’S MISSING

When we meet up with other family members on the road, Guu Ma engages them in complaints about the young, and I get to work solving whatever narrative puzzle the game has set me. Sunny has inherited the family restaurant, and the goal of this trip across China is to win the approval of her relatives, as well as their recipes. Her kin all seem to be at pivotal points in their lives too, and by gathering enough insight I can help untangle their thoughts.

## FIRE UP THE WAGON

Publisher Excalibur has marketed *Road to Guangdong* in much the same way as *Jalopy* – its better known, and practically only, genre mate – and it’s hard not to compare the two. I miss the functions that deepen your bond with the car, like pulling the bonnet release catch, rather than swapping parts through a menu.

Yet there’s a particular flavour to Guangdong – the pastel colours and the lulling soundtrack that maps Sunny and Guu Ma’s personalities across two radio channels. At first I found the gentle turns of its roads too simple, but now they’re soporific. If the game wants me to fall asleep at the wheel, I’m not going to fight it. ■







# OVERCOOKED 2

A year on, there's still no soggy bottom in sight. *By Jeremy Peel*

**Z**ombies are not known as fussy eaters. Yet this one – a sentient slice at the vanguard of the unbreathable horde – is demanding better service. It ordered a burger with only beef, lettuce, and cheese, but the one I'm holding also comes with tomato. That simply won't do. So it's back to the grills, while the malt monstrosity bangs its head against the door of my kitchen, threatening to bring the whole operation down.

Horde mode is the clear highlight of *Overcooked 2's* *Night of the Hangry Horde* DLC – a spin on tower defence in which you spend as much time repairing barricades as chopping ingredients in an attempt to keep your clientele at bay. But it's merely the latest course in a tasting menu of inspired additions to the most cooperative co-op game.

*Overcooked 2* was an incremental improvement on its predecessor, but it's stuffed with new mechanics by now. A common theme has been temperature. Starting with the *Surf 'n' Turf* level pack, Ghost Town Games has deepened the binary business of heating – food was either on the hob or off – with a gauge that measures warmth in degrees.

On the beach, you might have a kebab chopped and skewered above an open flame, but it won't be ready anytime soon if you're not tending to

## NEED TO KNOW

**RELEASE**  
August 7, 2018

**DEVELOPER**  
Ghost Town Games

**PUBLISHER**  
Team17

**LINK** [www.team17.com/games/overcooked](http://www.team17.com/games/overcooked)

the fire with the bellows. Similarly, ovens have turned from steady and dependable heaters to coal guzzlers, fuelled by a nearby furnace that must be regularly topped up with buckets of the black stuff. It sounds complicated, but this is exactly what *Overcooked* thrives on – those tasks that knock you out of the simple roles you've established among your team, throwing you into a thrilling state of barely controlled chaos.

The yin to the bellows' yang is the water gun, which functions as a kind of weaponised dishwasher – allowing you to clean a stack of used smoothie glasses from ten paces.

Peripherals like these add to *Overcooked's* carefully curated sense of disorder. Just as a thrown bag of flour can knock your sous chef off course, careless use of the water gun during washing up could send another player into the drink.

Complication, though, is the enemy of clarity. This is a game where you always juggle slightly too much information, constantly on the verge of stuffing three portions of potatoes into a roast dinner in a state of overwhelm. To counter that, Ghost Town Games has put plenty of work

into making *Overcooked 2* readable at a glance – a chopped item of food is always distinguishable by the icon above it, for instance. And you'll notice that it's impossible to put an uncooked pattie into a burger – a low-key prompt for you to think over what you might have missed.

Little touches like these save you from wasting precious seconds during timed restaurant sittings that often come down to the wire. But that coherence has been compromised, in places, by DLC. Smores might make perfect sense for an expansion themed around camping, but bars of chocolate camouflaged against wooden decking? Less so.

Worse, kebabs can be accidentally loaded onto a campfire without their skewers, where they'll fail to cook – sitting unlicked by the flames like Targaryen dinner until somebody notices what's wrong.

## A GAME WHERE YOU ALWAYS JUGGLE TOO MUCH INFORMATION

### MAMA, I'M COOKING

The odd oversight in presentation can't detract from portions this generous, though, and some of *Overcooked 2's* finest side dishes have been served on the house.

Not part of the season pass, ironically enough, is the game's seasonal campaign – released in legs to celebrate Christmas, the Chinese New Year, and whatever calendar event Ghost Town Games chooses to highlight next.

There's room on the campaign map for at least two more, and I'm rooting for one of them to mark my next birthday.

For the time being, tossing a prawn into a gigantic wok even as your comrade pulls it to a new spot on the terrace is, frankly, a chef's kiss moment.

Season passes have fallen out of vogue in game development lately. But as *Fortnite*-style services start to show their own shortcomings – setting studios on a path toward unsustainable expectations – it's worth taking stock of a game that's doing a fantastic job of filling tummies with DLC dessert. ■

## TOTAL WASHOUT *The fastest ways to a clean kitchen*



### THAT IN-SINK FEELING

Wait for the dirty mugs to pile up, then plunge them all into the sink at once and hold down the wash button.



### SPRAY AND PRAY

No quick route to a plate? The water gun works just like the fire extinguisher and has a far greater range.

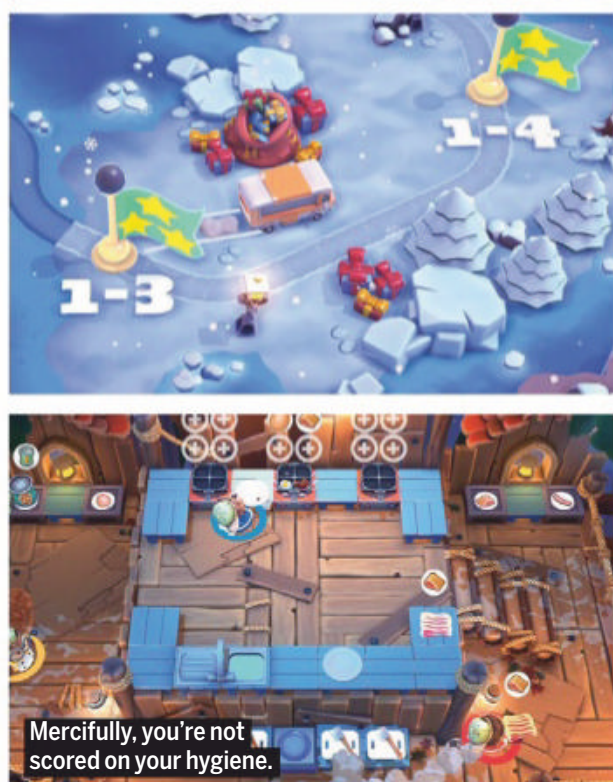
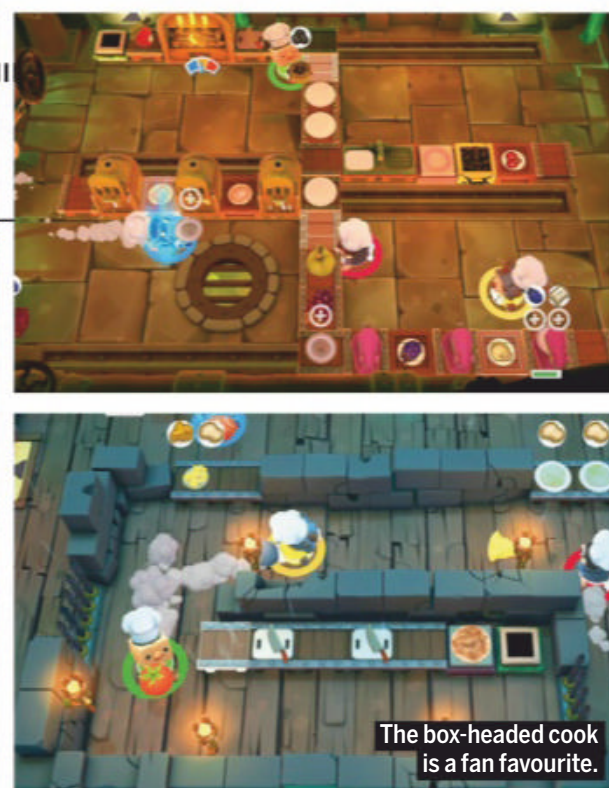


### WHAT'S THE (SPAWN) POINT?

You could lug that mixing bowl across the map, or drop it in the ocean and let it reappear back in place.









Green is the colour of life, of healing. Don't be fooled.



If you say 'cacodemon' five times, you'll have said a great word five times.





# SIGIL

Romero returns to Doom to play tricks. *By Jeremy Peel*

**H**as John Romero forgotten how to put lights into *Doom* levels? Nobody's going to hold it against him if he has – it's been 25 years since *Doom 2*, after all. Perhaps he could make an anonymous account on the Doomworld forums if he's embarrassed. It's just that I've spent a sunny afternoon squinting around in the dark of *Sigil*, Romero's new fifth episode for *Ultimate Doom*, feeling out pathways over lava I can't see.

It feels a little perverse that the only episode *Doom*'s designer has made in the full-fledged internet age is one where visual information is so hard to come by, and confusion the defining theme. But there's a lot about *Sigil* that's wilfully backward.

Andy dug into *Total Chaos* in issue 332, a *Doom 2* mod which, to the untrained eye, could pass for a contemporary survival horror game. That's indicative of the transformative advancements amateur tinkerers have made with the *Doom* engine over two and a half decades. But *Sigil* eschews all that, instead reverting to the game as it was at the close of *Ultimate Doom* – as if Romero had simply carried on

making levels in '95. Nonetheless, these are his most visually striking adventures in *Doom* to date. Brightly coloured assets, spotlighted by candelabra in the pitch blackness, give *Sigil* the aesthetic of theatre. And some of its prop placement has stuck with me – like the Cacodemon hidden through a letterbox in a wooden maze, invisible in the dark until illuminated by its own fireball.

## DARK DOOM

*Doom* has always played with light, but Romero's commitment to high contrast environments in the early part of *Sigil* changes what that means. I've become accustomed to targeting enemies by silhouette – a practice that demonstrates the strength of decades-old monster design in, well, black and white terms. The broad shoulders and



**NONETHELESS, THESE ARE HIS MOST VISUALLY STRIKING ADVENTURES IN DOOM TO DATE**

horns of the Baron of Hell ensure you'll never mistake it for an Imp, and the looming curve of a Cacodemon is distinct from that of a Lost Soul, whatever the distance.

In the dark, the game's audio cues become all-important too – did that Zombieman make his damage roar just now, or his death moan? There's a crucial pitch distinction there that could mean life or death in an episode where health packs are doled out with cruel infrequency.

Often I find myself funnelled down pathways with just the barest indication of where the floor is – edging blindly towards flickering light, wary of another frustrating fall through fissures in the earth. In the worst culprit, the narrow deathtrap of Sheol, Romero mercifully

Look at the earbones on this fella. Who was he in life? Yoda?



## EYES LEVEL *Celebrating the most expressive peepers on PC*



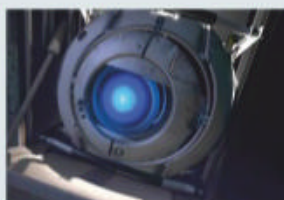
### TRIP ENSLAVED: ODYSSEY TO THE WEST

Ninja Theory lead the way in performance capture. Lindsey Shaw lent pathos to a character who makes a slave of the player.



### ALYX VANCE HALF-LIFE 2

This is the first twinkle of humanity you see in City 17, where the faces of local law enforcement don't say 'happy to help' so much as 'weaponised squid'.



### WHEATLEY PORTAL 2

With Portal 2 Valve set themselves a challenge – a companion whose only means of expression were Stephen Merchant's voice and two metal eyelids.



### CLIPPY MICROSOFT OFFICE

Clippy was the word processing assistant we never asked for – imbued with strange humanity by two blinking, smug spheres.



» punctuates the lava below with flaming teleporters that act as beacons, a distant chance at survival. It's a similar story at the level exit, where there's often a beefy enemy guarding the gate – lethal at low health, but if you can circumvent them, you might just make it.

Unlike levels in modern shooters, their personalities necessarily diluted by the sheer number of hands that touch them, it's impossible to play *Sigil* without thinking constantly of the designer behind it. There are times it feels as if I've been tricked by a Loki-like puppeteer, as when Romero spawns a Shotgun Guy directly behind me just as I press a button. Then, as the monster crumbles into gibs, a stimpack reveals itself in a nook behind the body –



## IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO PLAY SIGIL WITHOUT THINKING CONSTANTLY OF THE DESIGNER BEHIND IT

almost like an apology. This is shooter level design at its most human, for better and worse.

At *Sigil*'s lowest moments, it feels as if I'm learning the way through each level by rote, rather than standing any chance of reacting to what's being thrown at me in real-time. A chapter rarely takes more than five minutes in total, but many more than that in trial and error. They're arguably more fun to play through a second time, when you know the route and can appreciate their trickiness as an insider.

### SIGIL ME THIS

Those outside the games industry often make the mistake of assuming developers play games all day, but in Romero's case, that's halfway true. During level design he tests his creation over and over, making minute tweaks to rooms or planting some new hazard before hurling himself back into hell.

Playing *Sigil*, I've discovered the levels piece by piece, with liberal use of the quicksave and quickload keys – an almost parallel pattern to their design process.

Shooters tend to hide their boundaries, but I like the moments where Romero asks me to mess with *Doom*'s rules. When he plants shotgun shells on a small patch of lava, it's a prompt for me to test the limits – knowing that it'll be a couple

of seconds before burning damage kicks in. And the dead marine next to those bullets is a reminder of what'll happen if I overestimate my knowledge.

Like all megawads – sets of *Doom* levels substantial enough to be considered campaigns – *Sigil* is free. But you can pay extra for access to the soundtrack from Buckethead, who played guitar in Guns 'n' Roses during the recording of Chinese Democracy. And, while I'm explaining '90s things, you can get extra enjoyment out of a tape by holding down the play button midway to hear the track at double speed.

Buckethead's virtuosic riffing make a fitting follow-up to the MIDI-metal of the original *Doom*, and his accompaniment helps distinguish *Sigil* from its predecessors in the mind – a soundtrack as spiky and changeable as the levels themselves. It also reflects the shifting mood of *Sigil*, from the frenzied opening to a more considered pace. By Abbadon's Void, the episode midpoint that sets a backdrop of tall towers and red lightning against a lava lake, the riffs have given way to Vangelis-style synthwork and discordant stabs of sound.

*Sigil* is home to many tight and twisting trails. But as Romero lets colour seep back into his realm deeper into the campaign, the walls start to come down – literally. Buttons and keys open doors, as expected, but they also reshape huge chunks of the architecture.

Romero delights in lifting up the box that contains the player and letting them blink in the light. Cages of the Damned starts as a corridorred affair, but each push of a switch – the face of a laughing gargoyle – gradually transforms indoors to



outdoors. In the wide-open hellscape left behind, combat is different too. Using an insta-hit weapon such as the shotgun, I can kill a cacodemon long before its projectile reaches me, like the light from a dead star.

Those slow fireballs, incidentally, are one of the elements that still make *Doom* a pleasure distinct from today's shooters. When a near-miss causes me to dodge at my keyboard, I start to see the trajectory that led John Carmack to VR.

Fitting, then, that all this on-the-fly landscaping builds to a truly nauseating sequence – a mechanical cavern where segmented platforms move up and down out of sync, while huge crushers descend from the ceiling. Navigating them is like swimming out on a sea of steel in search of a life raft. Killing the guards and taking their safe spots is the only way to make it through.

It'd be strange to describe any of this as innovation – this mod is a throwback above anything else. But there's a sense that Romero is having fun with the tools, exploring ideas and developing themes. Structure is a common source of experimentation – in *Paths of Wretchedness*, a Greco-Roman vision of the underworld, there are keys at the end of three different paths. At the close of each one, you teleport back to the start and pick another. More than once in *Sigil* I've found myself looking back out onto an area I already know from a new perspective, like a *Dark Souls* player first exploring Lordran.

### SHOOTING SWITCHES

Throughout, the sigil of the title is a regular motif – a bright occult mark on the wall, in the centre of which sits a huge eye. It looks, frankly, daft by today's artistic standards. But there's something about its implementation. When you get stuck, the mod trains you to look about – and more often than not, there is the eye, watching from between the cracks in the basalt of hell. To reveal the way forward, you must shoot it – causing a tunnel to open, or a new bridge to rise up from a molten pool.

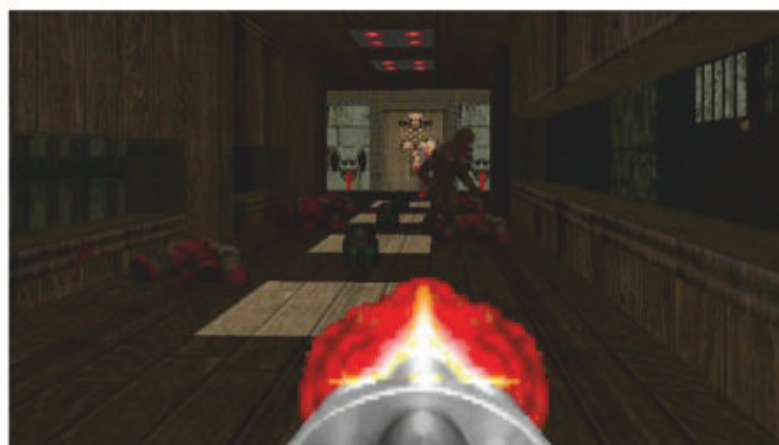
That act feels, to me, like an acknowledgement of the huge presence of the designer in *Sigil* – and in *Doom* levels as a whole, where a single eye shapes the world. Romero may have vacated the editor long before I stepped into his levels, but it feels as if he's still there watching – the devious stagehand pulling at levers, playing with my head, and most of all, having a tremendous time doing it. ■

## MASTERS OF DIM

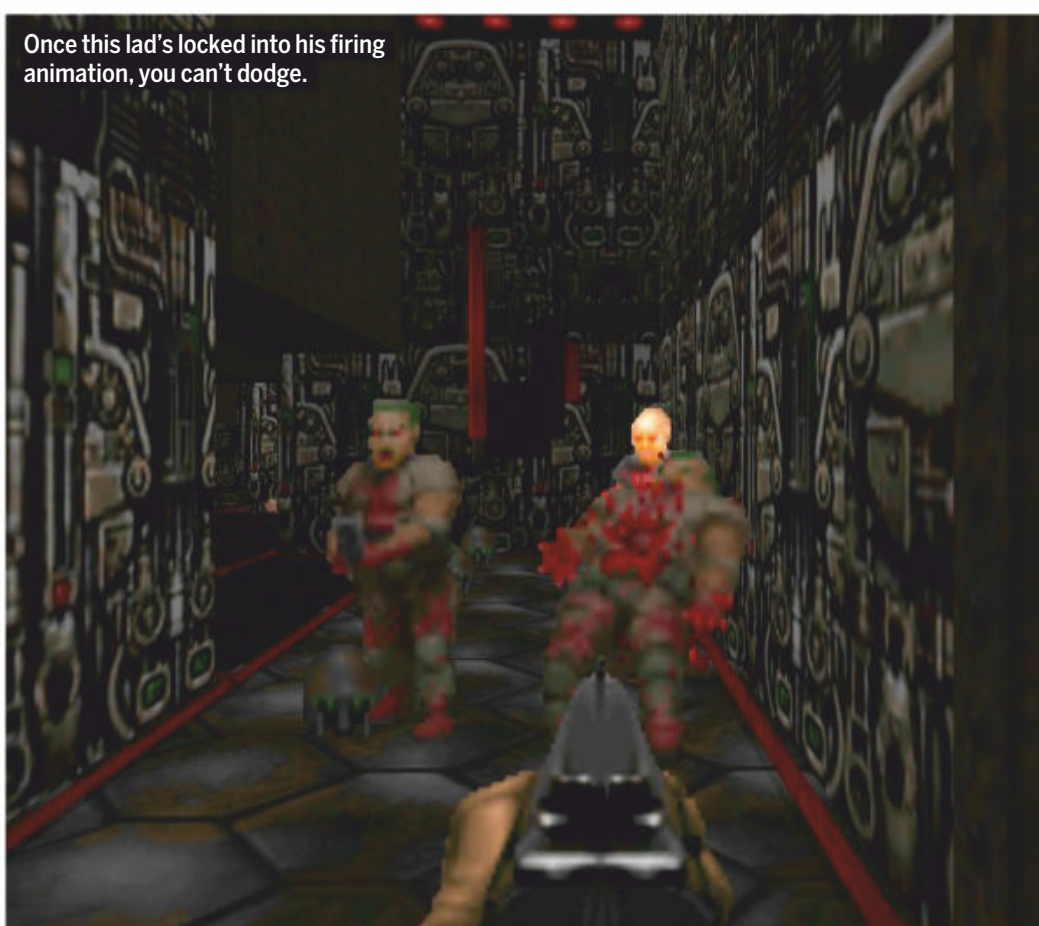
Getting lost in *Sigil* is a process







Once this lad's locked into his firing animation, you can't dodge.



Look at the testosterone-grown hairs on Doomguy's arms.





# PICKING EVERY FIGHT IN MIRROR'S EDGE

## PART III

DICE's non-shooter breaks  
out the big guns

*By Jeremy Peel*



## THE RULES

**1** Whenever somebody attacks Faith, fight back.

**2** Take every possible opportunity to use the guns.

**3** Only run once all other options have been exhausted.

**A**uthoritarian regimes often pick train stations as the place to present an idealised face to the world – a sort of dictator’s Instagram account. A station in a capital city is a point of entrance, a shiny front door to a society. It’s a confined space where message can be easily controlled.

No expense was spared on Moscow’s famous metro system, with enough marble and chandeliers to suggest an underground ballroom. At the height of the Soviet Union, photographs of Stalin were hung from its walls.

The street facade of the central station in Pyongyang, meanwhile, has the appearance of a shrine – thanks to the portraits of the two Kim Jongs at the foot of its clocktower. On their flanks, a long colonnade props up a row of letters, “Long live the Great Leader Comrade Kim Jong-un! Long live the glorious Workers’ Party of Korea!”

There’s nothing so audacious in Ryding Park, a subway station far beneath the rooftops of The City in *Mirror’s Edge*. There’s an intimidating order to its symmetry, yes

– and a patterned configuration of thin bulbs in the roof offers strange light, like that from the heat element of an oven. But the chairs are orange plastic, and the blue and white tiles of the platform suggest a swimming pool. The evidence of a surveillance state comes instead from the advertising – for gated estates, and secure, reliable phone connections. “With our network,” reads the CityEar advertisement, “you are never alone.”

Trains rattle past at breakneck speeds, shaking the whole structure, but I’m done with running. It’s here, in a couple of hours from now, that I’ll make my stand.

When we last left Faith, she’d emerged from the sewers to triumphantly blast away at riot cops with their own shotguns – but been forced by some gated level design to leave all those weapons behind. Even now, with mastery over the game’s disarm techniques, it feels as if I’m at the mercy of an invisible quartermaster who doles out the game’s firearms only when they see fit, before locking them away again once the fight is done.

## THE WRESTLER

As I jog through dry canals to reach the old runner training grounds, snipers stand high above on unreachable bridges. Ducking in and out of alcoves to dodge their sights feels like an indignity – when can I get my hands on one of those rifles and finally face down the city’s security

forces? The only weapon around these parts is Jackknife, a former runner who’s found a permanent home among the city’s criminal element. As expected, he knows something about the death of mayoral candidate Robert Pope, the killing for which Faith’s sister has been framed. He sends us after Travis ‘Ropeburn’ Burfield, a former wrestler turned head of a shipping firm. Pope had been Ropeburn’s employer, and it’s implied the latter may have wanted to depose him.

“Look,” my handler Merc warns, “I saw Ropeburn wrestle once. Broke some poor bastard’s arm, then headbutted the ref. He won’t be a talker, he’ll be a fighter.” In other words, this guy has been living by a self-imposed code of violence long before I got here. Using the bright yellow sign of Z Burfield International Shipping as a distant beacon, I make my way over to meet him.

A thing about server farms – they’re well-ventilated. I break into Ropeburn’s, then follow the shaft all the way to his office, just in time to overhear a conspiratorial phone call. The man’s broad shoulders betray a thug in a suit. Through the grate I have a clear view of his desk where a

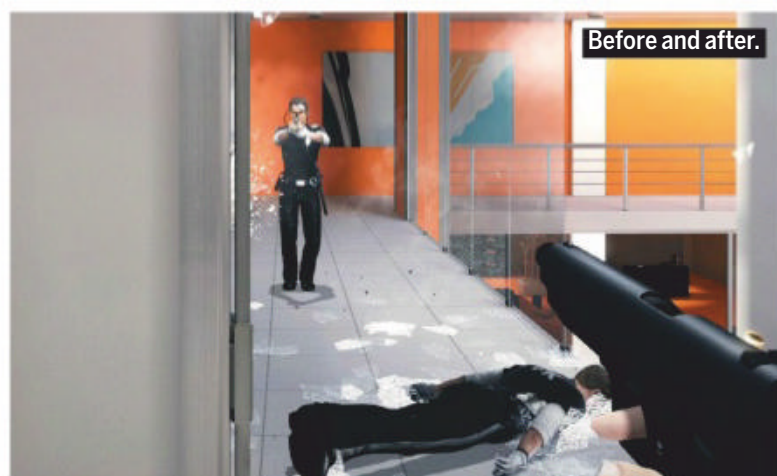
handgun enjoys pride of place – as if it were a conference phone or mug of coffee.

Once Ropeburn leaves, I waste no time. This is the first time the game has handed me a weapon without a fight, and I’m not going to turn it down. A magazine called ‘Nature’ lies discarded beside it, and it occurs to me that FPS developer DICE is reverting to its own.

Sure enough, I’ve triggered a silent alarm somewhere. The lifts have halted, and the Blues are swarming in. Blundering into the building’s lobby, I make a beeline for the tall fountain centrepiece and start climbing. Once at the peak, I open up a new path onto a third-floor corridor by firing through a glass pane – once to break, and again to shatter. Experience has left me acutely aware of how few bullets I can carry, and jealous of my enemies – who have the luxury of refilling their guns endlessly, according to the rules of ’90s action movies.

I let the encroaching cops handle the rest of the windows, saving my shells for them. The shotgun’s weight issue is a thing of the past – with the pistol, I can leap across large gaps with impunity, as if I were carrying nothing at all. My remaining ammo takes care of an unarmoured cop on a high mezzanine, and I disarm the next, even managing to take down one of the SWAT squaddies on the bottom floor. I get so carried away, in fact, I completely fail to notice I’ve taken a wrong turn

## THE ONLY WEAPON AROUND THESE PARTS IS JACKKNIFE, A FORMER RUNNER



Before and after.



Mirror's Edge still musters moments of astonishing environmental beauty, even now.





and have to repeat part of the jungle gym again, but I don't mind. I'm getting the hang of this.

On my way out of the building, I develop a pattern of cockily smacking my soles into the faces of SWAT teams just as they pound through each door, before relieving them of their weapons. Breach and clear *this*, you overdressed *Siege* wannabes. Their assault rifles, though, still click impotently – the bullets deemed off-limits by our invisible quartermaster.

I have a feeling that's about to change, though. It's helicopter o'clock, and although I can't kick the chopper in the gonads, I can fight the SWAT men it's dropping off. In fact, the game's telling me to hurt them, painting them as targets in red silhouette – where until now their black uniforms have been a prompt to run.

Engaging in a well-oiled disarm procedure, I turn the nearest machine gun on its owners and fire. Either The City's rifle manufacturer has recalled a faulty batch, or the game's arbitrarily deigned to start letting me use them. The bullets emerge with a strange, snippy sound, as if fired through the plastic tube of a pneumatic delivery system. I wonder whether these oddly un-bassy weapons are designed to sit comfortably in the middle of the sound mix – they're not even allowed to dominate the audio, let alone the game at large.

### LIVING ON THE EDGE

After the battle's done, I fire the rifle into the sky, and it takes two or three seconds for the clip to empty. After hours of bullets in the single digits, it feels less Point Break cool, more astonishingly wasteful.

The tone of the game is slowly changing, as my route back to the runners' hideout demonstrates. For those who think *Mirror's Edge* is pacifist, I present Exhibit Shotgun Cop Spawned At The End of a Long Piece of Scaffolding Before A Long, Long Drop.

Ropeburn talked about meeting an associate in a partially-constructed building on Renold's Street – and so a short while later, here we are, and so is Ropeburn's heli. His name evokes not so much wrestling as the nasty kid at school who gave everyone Chinese burns, merely to

## DISARMS RACE

### How to part a man from his gun



#### 1 GO LOW

Enemies aim at chest height, so you want to get beneath that and close the distance with a forward roll.



#### 2 BRING THE FIGHT

You're still at risk of a point-blank shooting. Wind your opponent by thwacking them in the groin.



#### 3 THE EXCHANGE

Wait until the cop attempts a pistol whip, then grab the gun when it flashes red. It's yours now.



#### 4 IT'S A KNOCKOUT

Let your enemy's momentum carry him to the ground. Continue on your day better equipped than before.

while away his lunch break. It fits. In fact, this place gives off the vibe of school after the bell rings – all flimsy ceiling panels and eerie silence.

When I get to the roof, Ropeburn pulls the same move on me I've been pulling on the cops – grabbing my shoulders the moment I walk through the door. What I've never done, though, is lift someone bodily and hurl them across a rooftop. "Did he send ya? You can both go to hell," he screams. "No one threatens me!"

There are few sights in this game I know better than Ropeburn lifting Faith up by her throat, pulling her close enough to see the grin spread across his yellow teeth, and then throwing her over a ledge. I've had to endure it many times. When *Mirror's Edge* first embraces combat, it does so in the most frustrating form possible – an instafail boss fight. Luckily, I only have to wrench the pole from his hand once.

I send Ropeburn tumbling off the side of the building, where he hangs and reveals his secrets – he did hire someone to kill Pope, and was planning to meet them at the mall tomorrow. But as Faith goes to pull him back up, a sniper on the adjacent roof shoots him dead.

On the way out heavy SWAT reinforcements force me down, through the empty subway under repair, to Ryding Park. I've come to think of an orange palette as *Mirror's Edge*'s code for violence. A gleaming tangerine tunnel takes me down into the station, like a subconscious activation switch.

Ryding Park is "closed for reconstruction" and it does feel as if *Mirror's Edge* is rebuilding itself before my eyes, as a game where force is a real option. Down here, where the passing trains raise the underground rumble to a roar, the armoury is finally opened.

First come the street cops with their pistols, which I promptly relieve them of, dodging between the cover offered by information boards and ticket booths. Then the SWAT arrive, shattering the glass over my head with heavy machine guns. My turning circle slows under the

This tempered glass might break safely, but I'm still a bit worried about those bullets.







weight of their weapons. But by misusing the spin move – designed to allow you to switch directions during a climb – I can swivel quickly to face enemies. It's an intense firefight, and I stick with it longer after Merc and the game tell me it's time to move on, eventually succumbing to the reinforcements swarming down the steps, who outnumber my bullets.

With headshots, I can take out two or three of the SWAT already on the platform with pistols, conserving assault rifle ammo for the next wave. I leave one alive longer than the rest. His death will trigger reinforcements, and I need time to lug machine guns up the platform to the far end, hoarding them in a farcical pile of black metal.

It's still a grossly imbalanced battle. Hiding behind a shuttered coffee stand, I let the reinforcements come to me, luring them down the platform in ones and twos.

At short range I can take them down in quick bursts, saving bullets, but in every instance I'm only a quick burst from death myself.

The final cop hangs back, so I emerge from cover and engage Matrix-like 'reaction time' as I open fire. He falls in slow motion, and the clattering screech of the soundtrack gives way instantly to a low hum.

I decide to count the dead, but the bodies have already disappeared. In *The City*, imperfections are covered up and hidden away. It's fitting that this aberration of a fight scene should be scrubbed from the records as soon as it's over, leaving

## I EMERGE FROM COVER AND ENGAGE MATRIX-LIKE 'REACTION TIME'

only the sheen of blue and white tiles.

Officially, this is a parkour game. But I now know it can be something far stranger. Ryding Park is where I get off – the terminus at which I finally feel I've conquered *Mirror's Edge* as a combat proposition. ■







Dealing with this crime scene is your first major challenge.

# POLICE QUEST

Revisiting Sierra's classic cop adventure. *By Andy Kelly*

**T**here are actually two versions of the original *Police Quest*, whose full, unwieldy title is *Police Quest: In Pursuit of the Death Angel*. There's the 1987 original, which has basic 16-colour graphics and uses the classic Sierra text parser. And then there's a VGA remake, released in 1992, which features a point-and-click interface, slightly reworked puzzles, and vastly improved visuals and sound. The first release has its charms, and is undoubtedly a classic of the genre. But for this retrospective I decided to revisit the 1992 version because, honestly, it's more fun to play – especially by modern standards.

*Police Quest* was a collaboration between developer Sierra On-Line

and retired police officer Jim Walls. When it was first released, most videogames were either fantasy or science fiction. But this was (and still is) unique in that it saw you stepping into the shiny black shoes of a regular traffic cop. Walls wanted players to experience the mundane reality of the job as well as the car chases and shootouts. The result is a game laden with often stifling procedure, where failing to play things by the book can result in you being fired or, if you really screw up, killed. Sierra often boasted in the series' marketing material that the *Police Quest* games were used to train real cops.

Set in the fictional town of Lytton, California, *Police Quest* follows the adventures of one Sonny Bonds, an easygoing traffic cop who gets tangled up in a case involving a drug kingpin known as the Death Angel.

The game begins with old newspaper clippings about what a peaceful, idyllic place Lytton is. But as the years roll on the stories become more depressing, revealing that organised crime, drugs, and gang violence have been creeping into the city. What better place for an ambitious young cop to prove his worth? But before Bonds gets to dip his toes into the glamorous world of the narcotics division, he has to pound the pavement as a regular old boy in blue.

### THE NAKED GUN

*Police Quest* is a fairly standard point-and-click adventure, at least in terms of how you interact with the world. There are no item combination puzzles or other familiar trappings of the genre here, and Bonds doesn't wander around with a pocket full of random objects in the hope that one of them might come in handy. Figuring out how to deal with

### NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED  
1992

DEVELOPER  
Sierra On-Line

PUBLISHER  
In-house

LINK  
[bit.ly/policequest](http://bit.ly/policequest)





The morning briefing is an important part of your day.



Make sure you change out of those civvies.



The headquarters of the Lytton police department.

dangerous situations in a way that is both safe and by the book is where the challenge lies. And, being a Sierra game, there are dozens of ways to die or otherwise end the game.

A good example of this, from the early hours of the game, is when a local business owner asks Bonds to visit a nearby bar and tell a gang of bikers to move their motorcycles from the front of her cafe.

Bonds enters the grimy dive bar and is approached by one of the gang. “Well, if it ain’t Little Boy Blue,” mocks the lead biker, who is brandishing a pool cue and doesn’t seem like the pragmatic type. “How’d you like me to help you swallow your tongue? Then you’d REALLY be blue!” So how do you deal with a situation like this? This is one of the most thrilling things about *Police Quest*: being suddenly confronted with danger, knowing that one bad play could send you to the morgue, and having to safely defuse it. My first, foolish instinct is to pull my .357 Magnum, but I learn the hard way that your service weapon should only ever be used as a last resort.

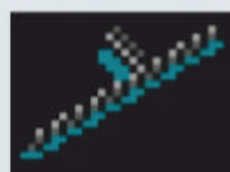
A series of messages flash up describing the fallout from my

## PACKING HEAT *The tools you need to do your job*



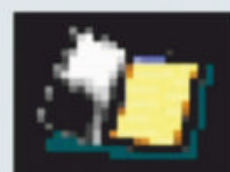
### SERVICE REVOLVER

A standard issue .357 Magnum with a wooden grip. If you pull the trigger you’d best prepare for a mountain of paperwork.



### NIGHTSTICK

If a suspect becomes aggressive your nightstick will come in handy, but misuse it and you may lose your badge.



### TICKET BOOK

You play as a traffic cop in *PQ*, which means writing a lot of tickets, whether it’s for speeding or illegal parking.



### RADIO EXTENDER

A cop’s best friend, used to call for backup or report a crime. This thing could save your life, so always keep it close.

decision. Bonds shoots the biker between the eyes, his wife sues the Lytton police department for several million dollars, and Bonds becomes an alcoholic shoe salesman, dying face-down in the gutter. When it comes to admonishing you for making bad decisions, *Police Quest* really doesn’t screw around. And so I reload a save from just before I entered the bar and try a different approach, which is a routine you’ll get used to when you play this game. Keeping my revolver firmly in its holster, I decide that this time I’m going to try and reason with the hairy

biker. Which, I quickly discover, is also a very bad call.

“Your attempt at reason, however noble, has failed,” the game tells me after I watch him beat Bonds to a pulp. “It’ll take the bar owner months to clean your blood off the walls. This is going to be a closed casket funeral.” The consequences of your mistakes are almost comical in their severity, and I often find myself pushing people’s buttons, waving my gun around, and generally acting like a jerk to see how the game will punish me. After some more experimenting I discover that the best way to handle





the biker is to smack him around with my nightstick. Sensing that I mean business, the gang backs down and agrees to move the bikes. Violence is rarely encouraged in the *Police Quest* series, but sometimes you have no choice.

Like many Sierra adventures, *Police Quest* has a scoring system. Points are earned by following procedure, whether that's reading someone their Miranda rights or using your radio to call for backup. But while this aspect of the game certainly is novel, and gives you an insight into how a police force operates, it can be quite tedious too.

Every time Bonds has to switch back to his civilian clothes you have to go through the same dull routine: drop off your patrol car keys and radio, dump the rest of your stuff in your locker, grab your towel, shower, and so on. And when you bring a suspect in for booking at the county jail you have to refer to the game's manual and tap in a series of violation codes relating to each specific crime they have committed.

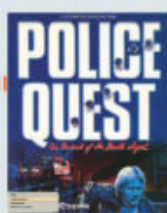
But this is by design, and is exactly the kind of experience Jim Walls wanted players to have. Things get a

little more interesting about halfway through the game when Bonds puts in for a transfer to the narcotics division and has it granted. This marks his transition from uniformed beat cop to plainclothes detective, and he finds himself working with a new partner, Laura Watts, to bring down the Death Angel. The procedural element is still there, but as a detective Bonds has a little more freedom. You also get to spend some time off the job, which gives you an insight into his personality and relationships with other cops. An important subplot involves his friend and fellow officer, Jack Cobb, whose

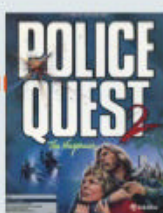
daughter has fallen victim to drug abuse. This gives the story some emotional weight and Bonds, a newly minted narcotics detective, something to fight for.

This all sounds pretty grim and serious, but *Police Quest* has a goofy sense of humour too. A running joke involves your hot-headed sergeant, Jonathan Dooley, being harassed by an unknown prankster he calls the Gremlin. This comes to a head when a live chicken is set free in his office. Some of the dialogue is pretty funny too, poking fun at hard-boiled cop movie dialogue. "No pulse, no vital signs whatsoever" says the narrator

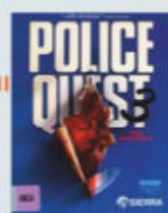
### CRIMINAL RECORD *The Police Quest series at a glance*



**1987**  
**Police Quest:**  
**In Pursuit of the**  
**Death Angel**



**1988**  
**Police Quest II:**  
**The Vengeance**



**1991**  
**Police Quest III:**  
**The Kindred**



**1992**  
**Police Quest:**  
**In Pursuit of the**  
**Death Angel (VGA)**



**1993**  
**Police Quest:**  
**Open Season**





The driving screen in all its impenetrable glory.

## TO GET ANYWHERE IN POLICE QUEST YOU HAVE TO MANUALLY DRIVE THERE

as you examine the scene of a bloody drug-related shooting. “This guy just booked a one-drawer stainless steel suite at the Toe-Tag Motel.”

### THE SMELL OF FEAR

After a slow start, the pace suddenly quickens in the final act when a body turns up and the investigation into the Death Angel leads the narcotics division to a seedy hotel. Here Bonds finds himself on a dangerous undercover mission, which comes to a violent end. He survives, of course, earning a commendation from the mayor. In the next game, *The Vengeance*, Bonds is a full-time detective working for the prestigious homicide vision.

This means that *In Pursuit of the Death Angel* is the only *Police Quest* game where you get to experience the everyday routine of a regular beat cop. However, even the murder police have to play things by the

book, and following procedure is still an important part of later games in the series too.

Although the game is perfectly playable almost 30 years after it was released, the driving system has not aged well at all. To get anywhere in *Police Quest* you have to manually drive there, using a clunky interface to navigate your patrol car around a top-down view of the Lytton city streets. It's slow, repetitive, and requires constant micro-management of your speed and direction. Whenever I found myself getting bored and going off to play something else, it was always during these sections. But what would an old adventure game be without a tedious minigame? And thankfully you spend more time on foot than in your squad car. Even so, I can see a lot of people trying to play the game for the first time being put off by this.

The point-and-click interface is pretty old-fashioned too, requiring you to repeatedly right-click to cycle through your various forms of interaction: look, walk, touch, etc. This was several years before the more intuitive ‘verb coin’ interface would be developed by LucasArts

in games such as *The Curse of Monkey Island* and *Full Throttle*. But even so, it's still a lot easier to play than the original release's text parser or a *Day of the Tentacle*-style verb wall. And thanks to a release on GOG, along with the rest of the *Police Quest* series, it runs perfectly on a modern PC.

### THE FINAL INSULT

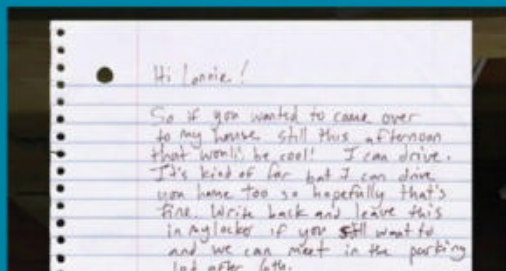
*Police Quest* is an interesting spin on the adventure genre, eschewing the usual point-and-click puzzles for something more realistic. But each encounter, whether it's pulling a drunk driver over or being the first responder to a shooting, is a puzzle all the same. You have to determine the best and, more importantly, legal way to deal with the situation, and hopefully not get killed in the process. The number of sudden deaths is harsh by modern standards, but it does make me wish adventure games would bring back dying. Often seen as a frustrating relic of the genre's primitive past, the threat of death gives *Police Quest* a genuinely tense feeling of your life being on the line, even if you can just reload your save and try again. ■



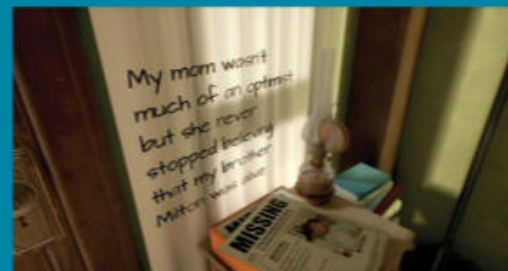


# LISTENING TO CONVERSATIONS IN EXPLORATION GAMES

Getting to know characters through chatter. *By Malindy Hetfeld*



**RIGHT:** You rarely need to be told why what you're seeing has meaning.





**T**here's something eerie about how walking simulators drop you into an otherwise entirely empty landscape, particularly when they aren't built to look empty. Often it seems as if everyone has simply stepped away and just never returned, making it all the more impactful when you do come across a sign of life – usually in the form of a snippet of conversation. I love it.

I have a lot of love for stories that you uncover by being a bystander to conversations that don't concern you at all. Getting a glimpse of how characters talk to each other – or even themselves – makes them feel that much more human.

Games focused on exploration and discovery are the best for this, because it's rare that the conversations you hear or memories you witness ever involve your character. You're looking in on past events and, unless you listen closely or find corresponding pieces later on that put what you've heard or read in context, these instances stand alone as snapshots of someone's life.

Take *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*. At one point you happen across a conversation between Father Jeremy and Wendy. They are discussing how to raise interest in a special sermon concerning the frightening events in their village, when Wendy takes a verbal swipe at Jeremy for something he'd done in the past. He knows what she's referring to, but you don't. At the same time there's much to learn about both characters from their conversational dynamic. Wendy, for instance, seems to be a person for whom it is hard to forgive and forget. Jeremy is able to put his duty over his personal feelings.

Stumbling in on conversations makes me aware of how much I don't know about characters and their situation, and the naturalistic writing means that no one gives the sort of blatant exposition that would fill me in. There are no outsiders other than

## SILENCE IS OLDEN *Other forms of conversation in games*



### BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL

The character addresses the player and thus reveals themselves as a figure doing your bidding.



### MAKING CHOICES

Select dialogue choices and pick the reaction you feel fits best, ensuring you identify more strongly with your character.



### QUEST DIALOGUE

You approach a character and they reveal their problem and ask you to fix it. A conversation meant to send you on your way.



### TALK TO YOURSELF

Characters like Lara Croft vocalise their plans and feelings to keep you on track and react to what's happening.

myself in need of an explanation, and when exploring a specific point in time – for example the imminent catastrophe in *Tacoma* – there's not much room for verbal reminiscence. Even when the characters are explicitly talking to me, it's always under the assumption that I may have to fill certain gaps in my knowledge myself. The diary entries in *Gone Home* and *What Remains of Edith Finch* may be directed at my character, but people don't normally write down recollections with me as a player in mind.

## EAVESDROPPING

It's just damn good writing – giving you enough hints to figure out the broad events, but never spending too much time dryly belabouring every small detail and scrap of context. Because, frankly, it doesn't matter whether you understand everything or not. It's not like you need the information specifically in order to complete a quest. The story you're witnessing has taken place, and you're here to listen to it. I think this is also why some people struggle to find entertainment in exploration games. Listening is a passive skill, and everything we traditionally associate with games is active and reactive. Here the interactive quest lies in putting a story together.

I find story snippets I uncover through in-game conversations more engaging mostly because there are so many gaps in the story for my imagination to fill. (Unsurprisingly,

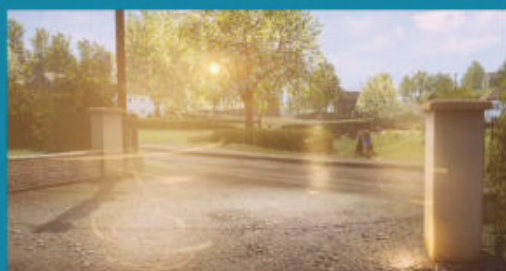
slice of life films, which work by a similar principle, are also my favourite.) In *Firewatch*, you can clearly feel Henry and Delilah grow on each other over a series of conversations. They talk about more personal things and adopt a more playful tone with each other over time, and I spent a long time thinking about what else they might talk about, how each of them might have reacted to certain topics and what they may have bonded over given their personalities. How you can build an understanding of characters

## THERE ARE SO MANY GAPS IN THE STORY FOR MY IMAGINATION TO FILL

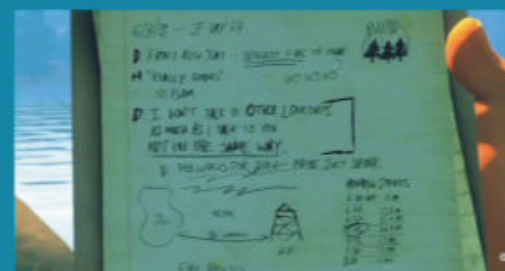
from a relatively small amount of material is another thing that makes the writing in these games so great.

Conversation snippets are another way in which exploration games address the behaviour a lot of other game genres also encourage, from the need to put the puzzle together, to the hoarding tendencies you can develop over wanting to see and hear everything in an RPG or open world game.

It's decidedly less voyeuristic and more interesting to listen in on people in a game than to imagine the lives of the strangers you saw at the park or to read someone's text messages over their shoulder. ■



**RIGHT:** Coming across other people after spending so long with introspective conversation comes as a shock.





JEREMY  
PEEL

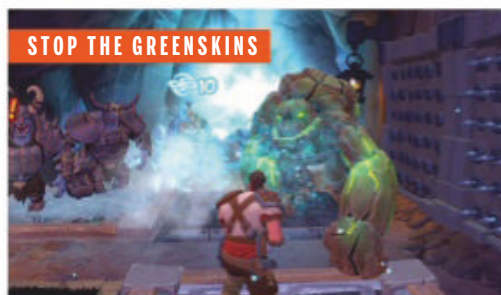
When I was a young boy, my father took me into the city, to buy a PC game. He said, "Son, won't you grow up?"



## JALOPY

[shop.excalibur-games.com/products/jalopy](http://shop.excalibur-games.com/products/jalopy)

→ A road trip in a knackered Trabant during the fall of East Germany, *Jalopy* is *Euro Truck Simulator* reimagined as an art game. You wind up loving the car, which needs regular attention just to keep going. The mundane moments are oddly memorable – washing the wheels, or checking into your bare motel room.



## ORCS MUST DIE! 2

[robotentertainment.com/games](http://robotentertainment.com/games)

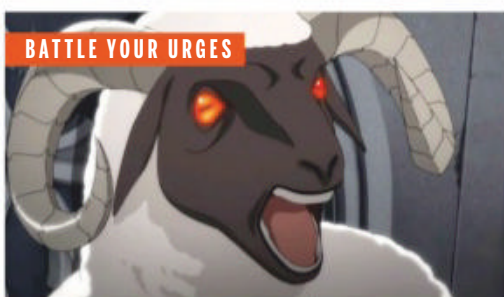
→ There's a rhythm to *Orcs Must Die!* – the way its thoughtful trap placement phase flips to hectic siege defence and back again, like the repeating structure of a James Brown song. Every round has a compositional feel, as you build up the perfect killboxes. It's that creativity which makes it an all-timer.



## TYRANNY

[www.paradoxplaza.com/tyranny/TYTY01GSK-MASTER.html](http://www.paradoxplaza.com/tyranny/TYTY01GSK-MASTER.html)

→ Obsidian's strangest RPG positions you as an inquisitor within the conquering army of, basically, fantasy Stalin. Your job is to deliver justice in a world where values are defined by bad people, and to decide whether order is preferable to the pain that will follow a rebellion.



## CATHERINE

[catherinethegame.com](http://catherinethegame.com)

→ Half social simulation, half block-budging puzzle game with hooves, this strange beast was a one-off from the *Persona* team released in 2011. *Catherine* concerns a commitment-phobe 20-something who cheats on his partner and is punished for it in life-or-death trials as he sleeps. Fun!

# MUST PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST  
OF THE BEST  
GAMES YOU CAN  
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Jeremy Peel



## MIRROR'S EDGE

[www.ea.com/games/mirrors-edge](http://www.ea.com/games/mirrors-edge)

→ More beautiful than ever on contemporary PCs thanks to some forward-thinking tech and the most striking art direction in a decade. The campaign is an enjoyable slice of Matrix nostalgia, but the very best bits are the time trials, which let you find and hone routes DICE never considered. Par-cor blimey.



## FAR CRY 4

[www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/far-cry-4/](http://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/far-cry-4/)

→ Ubisoft overreached with the unfocused sequel. *Far Cry 4* is the tauter refinement – outpost assaults and emergent chaos, while leaving space for an ostentatious yet nuanced villain, Pagan Min. Kyrat is his stage, but its breathtaking Himalayan backroads are yours to conquer in a tuk tuk with an uzi.



## RAYMAN ORIGINS

[www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/rayman-origins](http://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/rayman-origins)

→ Michel Ancel is most celebrated for Ghibli-esque adventures of the spirit, but this giddy platformer might be his best game with Ubisoft Montpellier – folding in the lessons of *Super Meat Boy* and elevating co-op to slapstick through silly sounds and animation. The later *Legends* is equally inventive.



## DRIVER: SAN FRANCISCO

[www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/driver-san-francisco](http://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/driver-san-francisco)

→ Ubisoft Reflections, one of the studios that works on *Watch Dogs*, was hopping between the perspectives of civilians long before *Legion*. This open world is dreamed up in the head of comatose cop Tanner, so you can leave your body at will to take over any other driver.



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SPIFFY-THAMES, CAMILLA

**OCCUPATION: THESPIAN**

Awaiting callback on a Marvel role

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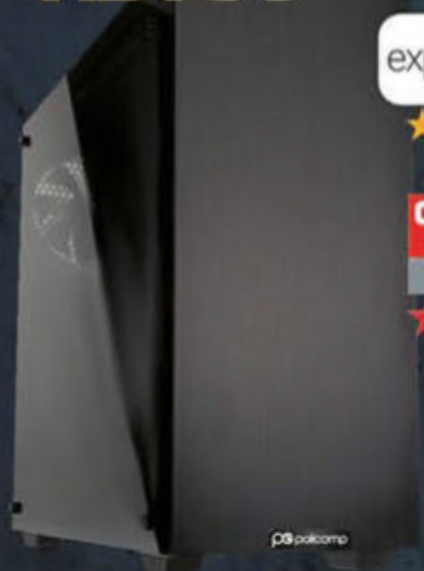
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